

# SYMBOLS, MEANING, AND THE DIVINE PRESENCE

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**S**YMBOL-MAKING in America is my theme, but inevitably this means for us theological and liturgical symbols in America. More precisely, liturgical symbols in the secular American world, not yet lost for God and yet in vast difficulty with its liturgical symbols. How are theological and liturgical symbols possible in secular America? My central thesis is perhaps better expressed by Raimundo Panikkar: liturgy must express the sacred quality of the secular if it is to be meaningful. I shall here try to follow out the implications of this thesis with regard not only to theology and ethics—as many Catholics have already sought to do—but with regard to liturgy.

## HOW SYMBOLS MEAN FOR US

How do symbols mean for us? And how is it that in meaning for us, symbols seem to put us in touch with what is real and to communicate to us a cohering and transforming power? These are the basic questions both of contemporary theology and of liturgy—the two disciplines, separate as they seem, which live in and through the same mystery of divine communication, of reality and power transmitted through symbols. In both cases, although we can reflect on this mystery of divine communication, we cannot ourselves create or evoke it, or increase it by rearranging the furniture. The direction of the movement comes the other way: the divine communicates itself to us through symbols, its presence is *there* already in the symbols, and our worship, like our theological affirmation, is a response to this objective presence—as the classical doctrines of revelation, *ex opere operato*, justification by grace through faith alone, and Barth's theory of religious language each in its own queer way affirm. With this caveat in mind, that neither the most intelligent theological reflection nor the most sensitive liturgical rearrangement can itself evoke the divine presence, we can nonetheless reflect on the mystery of this presence and of its communication to us, and thus possibly see in which direction we might turn in order to sense it anew.

How do symbols mean, and in meaning communicate reality to us? Not all symbols are alike, and the rules appropriate to one kind do not necessarily apply to symbols at another level. The closest sort of symbols to the kind we are here concerned with, liturgical and theological symbols, are our more basic social symbols, that is, those symbols,

shared by a society, which structure its life-world by shaping its ultimate horizon, defining its constituent parts, placing each part in its relation to the others, assigning tasks, goals, privileges, and obligations to people, and thus giving unique shape or form to that social world. Clearly, such symbols are political, economic, social, and individual in content, since they help define both ourselves in our various roles and our interlocking social relations. Together this set of interrelated symbols defines symbolically—as our customary social behavior may define “incarnately”—a community’s total way of life, the kind of community and of people that group is among the world’s peoples—in our own case, as a democratic, bourgeois, affluent, materialistic, moralistic, semi-Christian society, one involved in incarnating something called the American Way of Life.

There are some symbols here to which we probably really respond: individual rights, free speech, equality before the law, consent of the governed, emphasis on personal integrity. There are others at which academics and religious tend to shudder: individual accomplishment and self-reliance, the self-made man, the sanctity of property, the overriding rights of hard work, the centrality of private or individual happiness, the wonders of affluence, the beatitude of success, etc. These more reflective or notional symbols, if elaborated into institutions, form the basis for such theoretical disciplines as political, economic, and social theory and ethics. They can, however, also be incarnated into more concrete earthy, material symbols: a conglomeration of geographical references (wide plains, high mountains, green valleys, etc.), ethnic peculiarities, historical events, culminating in such familiar and potent symbols as the Cadillac, the milk shake, the busy, successful executive, the accomplished, sunny young mother, and so on. One thing is immediately clear from this brief sociology of Americanism: even the most secular society lives by its fundamental symbols. Its institutions as systems of shared meanings and expectancies are structured by these symbols, and thus the roles of each of us, and so the meaning, purpose, and aims of our lives, are symbolically determined—even if, as in our case, the symbolical determination is towards a mode of existence that is oriented away from inward and symbolic spirituality and towards things and outward security and success. As in religious societies of old, we in a consumer culture still live in and through the unseen, an unseen that comes to us in symbolical forms.

As is evident, a whole way of being in the world is expressed in the symbols common to American life. But even more to our present point, a way of life is created, re-created, and generated here. We Americans do not make these symbols so much as they make us: our expectancies,

goals, hopes, fears are determined here, and correspondingly our most fundamental moves in life, voluntary and involuntary, are shaped by these symbols. They make us who we are. We should therefore note the normative, even prescriptive, character and role of these social symbols: they tell us what authentic humanity is to be for us, what its role, possible vocations, goals, and joys should be, and above all what an authentic community is. They structure a world in which we find a place and a task, and they point out to us the task that is to be ours—be it making money, being a distinguished scientist, or a Hollywood starlet. According to these norms we are told what humans really are and so what fulfils our humanity, and how to gain that beatitude. Americans are not pushed by some sardonic fate into reduplicating endlessly the national type; we are, rather, each one of us for himself and one by one (as Schleiermacher said about sin) lured into embodying these types or models communicated to us through this whole range of common symbols. They are for us then “ultimate” in the twin senses that they guide and shape our cognitive and moral judgments and that they determine the one life we have, its shape, its destiny, its weal and its woe.

Finally, note the inevitable reference to reality intrinsic to such potent social symbols: they communicate to a people what humans really are, what community really is (not just what we or they think it is), and so what the grain of history itself really involves. No society can function, no social roles can lure our activity and devotion, no government can inspire our obedience, no politics can incite us to action, unless the symbolic world each offers communicates to us reality as well as value, and thus promises to usher us into the real world latent in history’s obscure developments. In other times fundamental social structures were divinely ordained, and the symbols expressive of them became part of the structure of the religion of the society, if not identical with it. Latterly the divine source has for our common life fled, but neither Communist nor American society fails to believe and to assert that its symbols represent the grain of history itself. The meaning, legitimacy, and power of social symbols thus unite descriptive, normative, and ontological elements into what can only be called a religious symbolic structure. Culture and culture’s symbols do, as Tillich said, mediate an ultimate concern and possess a religious substance; and the problem of the relation of the symbols of culture to Christian symbols has been and is a crucial issue for theology and liturgy alike.

If, then, we pose our initial question to these symbols: how do cultural symbols mean and how do they communicate transformative power, the answer is obvious. They mean so powerfully to us, in fact they almost *are* us, because they shape and thematize our real world, our life-world, the

ordinary social world in which we really are and know that we are. The sense of reality and so of authority and power in these symbols comes from their intrinsic relation to our common and shared life-experience. After all, we are born into the world shaped by them, almost everyone we know is determined by them, and all our shared possibilities are expressed by them. Their reality and power are self-evident; they are the structure of our realest world. Such symbols communicate reality to us because they are ingredients as reality's essential structure in our daily experience—not because they are “proved”; and they mean because they shape us and so have a vital use and role in our being and becoming ourselves. They shape our real world and ourselves; and what else could the words “meaning” and “validity,” “use” and “verification” be pointing to? By the same token, functioning social symbols are not “disproved”; rather, when they do die, it is because our life-world has receded from them, as when we move from home to another culture, from ethnic ghetto to the wide world, and find our once real social world now only a quaint, queer, arbitrary, and slightly absurd corner of a much vaster reality.

Thus it is clear that without touch with ordinary, shared experience, with the real life-world of day to day and so of today, symbols weaken in intrinsic power and validity, and lose their function and role. At first they become merely traditional, rote, even magical devices, extrinsic, heteronomous forms that crush rather than shape our true existence now rooted elsewhere. At last, however, all reality having fled to the new life-world, they are left inert and flat ghosts, emissaries of a lost world that is no longer real and embodying meanings that no longer mean. This slow bleeding to death of once omnipotent symbols is not totally strange to present Catholic experience.

It might seem from this that in a secular world religious symbols, now separate from the secular life-world and so inert and dying, must revitalize themselves by “getting with” our dominant and robust social symbols, our civic religion, and thus find a real role by putting into Christian form the democratic, egalitarian, possibly the revolutionary symbolic structures of a secular society—as a good number of anxious Catholics seem to suggest. Such a temptation is by no means new, and debate about it has a long and honored tradition. There has, in fact, been a kind of love-hate, attraction-repulsion relation between cultural and religious symbols throughout history, and possibly our analysis helps to reveal its anatomy. Religious symbols lose their reality if they are separated entirely from the life-world; yet they lose their integrity if they are simply identified with the social symbols that structure that world.

On the one hand, religious symbols are drawn inexorably to participate in the life-world if they are to survive at all; for here alone is where reality, meaning, and transformative power are. Thus, if during their vigorous days they find they cannot so relate to culture and retain their integrity, then they do not abandon the life-world of their votaries but they remove that life-world itself from the wider culture and set it within their own religious orbit, as in the early Church, in monasticism, and in all the forms of sectarian withdrawal where religion itself structured the daily life-world in order for religion to survive. On the other hand, religious symbols cannot become merely identical with the social symbols that structure and lure our common life, lest again they lose their integrity and die. In such an identification there arises an Americanized Christianity whose *real* criteria of reality, truth, and value are shaped by the symbols creative of the social world of a suburban, corporation, consumer, and nationalistic culture and so whose *real* sacramental elements are an enlarging church role, a new church plant, a full school, expanding committees, the executive desk, two telephones, and a plaque as the best "corporate representative" of Vatican and Pentagon alike. What can liturgy be *then* if the only reality its symbols really mean and so which they can communicate is the profane reality out the church door in the town? No wonder such a church is finally emptied when its people more and more enter the town itself and find they can live there without the church's help. Religious symbols that lose a special judgment and a special promise over against culture also lose their life and reality.

The classical answer, in both Catholicism and Protestantism, is to recognize two zones of influence: that of the life-world where social symbols predominate, and that of the religious world—above, beyond, and after in Catholicism, within and later in Protestantism—to which religious symbols, theological, moral, and liturgical, refer. One problem of this solution, just now vividly seen by most Catholics, is that our most fundamental Christian symbols refer to precisely that life-world and not to some other zone; they are here to shape, thematize, empower, and direct ordinary life to its natural goal, not to shape some other level of existence somewhere else. Thus the two-zones solution misses the basic point. And the end of that road in a developing secular period is the fatal separation between secular nature and supernatural grace, a profane life-world and special religious places, leading to inert and extrinsic theological symbols, unreal and meaningless because out of touch with ordinary experience, and empty sacramental elements. Thus occurs the same result as above, namely, a church whose religious elements are frozen and empty, and whose real life is its life as determined and

empowered by the social life-world, the life of culture—and so a church using the remnants of its sacrality to bless instead of transform, as Ralph Keifer put it, “all the most oppressive elements of our culture.” Religion can safely neither incorporate itself into culture nor separate itself completely from culture; in either case, paradoxically, ordinary life is shaped by other symbols and religion is left empty in itself and so with only a demonic role in the world. Put theologically, as Augustine might have phrased it, our existence is in this world of time, and only if the divine is incarnate here in our life-world can we listen, be moved, and be redeemed; and yet this world where we are is fallen, and so only if religion challenges, judges, and transforms that life-world from beyond itself is there also any hope for redemption.

How, then, can Christian symbols *mean* for us if they can neither be separated from nor identified with our life-world as it is shaped by social symbols? If symbols mean and communicate in so far as they shape and transform our common, ordinary experience, to what ordinary experiences or level of common experience in a secular world do Christian symbols refer? If we do not mean ordinary experience *as is*—as it is formed and lived in culture—nor a special religious level or type of experience, what experiences do Christian symbols shape? Or, to return to our first theme, if Christian worship is a response to the objective presence of God in experience, and not just a presence in special experiences in church or monastery, how is this possible in a secular world? Where and how in our ordinary life does the presence of God manifest itself?

In reply, let me begin by stating boldly another thesis which is, I believe, consonant with the most creative and important trends in present Catholic thought and life; I shall try to interpret worship in the light of this thesis. As the best present Catholic ethics views Christian obligation as directing us not towards a level of grace beyond nature but towards the reshaping of man's natural and social life to its own creative end, so Christian worship should celebrate not the God of special religious places but the God of all places and times, the God of the world and the world's process. Christian worship can no longer be tied to a two-zone Christianity which celebrates alone a special divine presence appearing exclusively in sacred events and which points to a level beyond and above the secular level. Rather, Christian worship in our world should seek to celebrate in the Christian community the presence of God's creative and healing grace in natural, secular experience. Worship, then, responds not merely to God's special presence through liturgical action—though there must be that special presence lest all become blurred in one fallen world. Rather, its goal is, first, to reawaken through

concentrated expression our awareness of the ultimacy that grounds, permeates, and guides our entire life in and out of church, and second, to relate us all in shared celebration, contrition, praise, and commitment—in short, in faith—to that ever-present ultimacy through Christian symbols and thus in Christian form.

Such awareness and such faith are, I believe, dependent on the special works of divine grace; but *what* we are aware of when we have faith, *what* we have faith in, and thus *what* in the end our worship, trust, and commitment respond to is the divine presence throughout the scope of natural and social life. If, as modern Catholic theological ethics assures us, the purpose of the gospel is the liberation of human natural and social existence into its essential human form, rather than the translation of our nature to a new level, and if, as the same writers say, in that sense the eschatological promise embodies the fulfilment of God's creative and providential work in concrete social history and not just its transcendence beyond history, then it must follow that the divine presence which a contemporary Catholic worship celebrates, to which it responds, and which heals and transforms, is a presence within the secular and the historical orders, the order of natural and social existence, not exclusively a presence specially lowered down into an alien world of nature by miraculous acts of grace. As Catholic theology and ethics have moved radically away from the two-zone world of their past, so liturgical and sacramental theology must seek to reinterpret themselves so as to relate our ordinary social life-world to Christian liturgy in ways other than a theoretical separation and so frequently an actual capitulation.

### THREE LEVELS OF SYMBOLIC MEDIATION

This conception of worship as the celebration of a divine presence throughout our ordinary existence, and yet a presence obscured in our secular world, is paradoxical in the extreme. How do Christians celebrate a presence in office, bedroom, supermarket, or country club that they do not and seemingly cannot feel, dominated as they are by the social symbols of a secular-worldly culture? Thus the two-zone theory seems to make obvious sense—until we recall it has been tried for generations and with fatal results for the present situation. To help us understand this conception, I suggest a further thesis concerning the three fundamental meanings of symbol in Christian theology, three levels of symbolic mediation. Let us note, as we develop these three levels, that each implies what can legitimately be called a sacramental theory of religious symbolism, namely, one in which the divine is mediated to us through its presence within the finite.

*First Level of Symbolic Mediation*

A religious symbol can be defined as finite medium, or creature, in which the divine power is active and transformative, and so which manifests or reveals through its own intrinsic being or activity the creative presence of that divine power. Thus, the sea, a mountain, a people, a person—in fact, any creature—can and have so become “symbols” of the divine being and activity: each in its own way, and each through its own character and integrity as a creature, becoming a medium or symbol of the ultimate. If in our faith God is never experienced directly in this life, He is experienced only in this way through symbols, through the creaturely world He creates, sustains, permeates, and guides to its fulfilment. The notions of creation and providence, then, applied to our question mean that potentially every creature is a symbol, and even more that it is itself only *as* a symbol. As a creature of God upheld by His power alone and good through His presence alone, each creature is, as Augustine proved, itself only when its autonomy, its essential character, reflects that creative divine power. Humans achieve humanity when they are images or reflections of God, when their autonomous freedom unites with grace. Providence, God’s ordaining work in the general life of history, means in turn that human community achieves itself, becomes truly human, when community too exists as a symbol of the divine providential purposes, when its being as just and human shows forth the divine rule and manifests the divine being; and such is the eschatological conception of the kingdom. But this sacramental or theonomous principle of the nature and perfection of the creature in God reaches its clearest expression in the Incarnation; for our faith, the presence of God is paradigmatically seen in and precisely through the fully human person of Jesus, and thus is Jesus the true *humanum* precisely in reflecting throughout his existence the divine presence.

In each case the sacred or the divine is present and manifest in and through the finite; in turn, the finite becomes its true self only as it becomes a vehicle or medium for that inward grace, reflecting and so revealing its presence. To understand itself and its destiny *truly* as finite, and so to achieve its true or natural integrity as a creature, is, as Augustine said, to understand and to constitute itself precisely as a creature, a finite being upheld, directed, called, and healed by the divine power. Nature thus can never be, either in reality or in conception, separated from grace; each creature in its essential or natural being, as *itself*, is a “symbol” of the presence of the holy, and it becomes its authentic self when the pattern of its life in faith inwardly and outwardly in action reflects that creaturely status and role as an image of God.



If this be so—and it seems the clear implication of the most fundamental Christian symbols—then the primary (logically and ontologically, if not in honor) meaning of the word “symbol” has reference to the creature as creature—lest we conceive of the creatures about us and of ourselves as *merely* natural, as essentially secular and profane, alien from God and strangers to grace, and lest we be driven, as all classical doctrine seems to have been, to a separation or division of the divine and the human natures of Christ, a separation of heaven from earth, and of liturgy from life-world. Thus is the divine present throughout the life of the creature: in its being, its meanings, its relations, its truths, its judgments, its norms, its temporality, and its death. This presence in all of life gives “secular” and so real meaning to our theological symbols of creation, providence, judgment, and promise, and our continual experience of this dimension of ultimacy in our entire existence alone makes it possible for us to be human, and is to question, to wonder, to talk, to doubt, and to believe religiously and so to think theologically. These are the experiences of the ordinary life-world we were searching for, obscured as much as revealed by our common social structuring of that world.

Worship, therefore, is primarily related to this presence of the divine throughout the human creature’s existence. Its central purpose is to bring to awareness and to celebrate that universal presence, to shape that awareness into Christian form, and through that shaping of our natural existence by sacrament and word to elicit gratitude, contrition, recommitment, and transformation of that natural existence. It is the holy as it permeates our entire life as creatures, and at every level of that life, to which worship primarily responds: the holy that founds our being, that undergirds our creative meanings, that enlightens our truths, that inspires our creativity, that cements and deepens our relationships, elicits and demands our moral judgments, and directs our common efforts to recreate and liberate the world—and forgives and completes the waywardness in those efforts and grounds our hopes that they will be so completed. It is this ultimate dimension to our personal, social, and historical being that constitutes that divine presence in ordinary experience which provides the *real* basis of Christian worship.

Here we too are in principle the symbols or media receptive of the divine and so potentially reflective and even revelatory of grace. If this presence of the holy in our own existence is completely unknown, the other levels of religious symbols will communicate little or nothing to us. It is this, therefore, that gives to them their feel of reality, their meaning for us, and their transformative power. The inward “spirit” side of revelation, the work of God in us that makes possible His communication to us through Christian symbols, is constituted by our self-awareness of ourselves as “symbols” of God’s presence and power; it is through the

Spirit as this self-awareness of God's work in us that we see His truth. This also gives another view of the problem of the two-zone view in a secular world. If we conceive of worship as for people who live in a *totally* secular or natural world, grace being on another level found only in church, then there is in ordinary experiences no base for the special acts and experiences of liturgical life. Creatures in a two-zone world where nature and grace are radically separated cannot become "symbols," participating, in becoming their natural selves, in the divine power and grace; and thus do their symbols in worship become empty of natural common content.

### *Second Level of Symbolic Mediation*

As is evident, however, the finite creature—at least the human creature—is estranged from his and her own essential nature. An alienation from the natural self and from its natural relations has occurred because a prior alienation from the ground of that self, from God, has occurred. Thus are God, the true self, and the true other all obscured, veiled, lost, and forgotten; and the relations between the three are radically distorted. Men and women remain rooted in deity but forgetful and unconscious of this rootage; he and she remain centered in love for others, yet forgetful of this in love for self, and so on. The divine presence in all creatures, hidden originally within the integrity and autonomy of the creature, is now doubly veiled by sin, by our alienation from the sacred source and ground of our life. In all of us, therefore, it must be reawakened and reappropriated by special manifestations of the sacred. As a race and as individuals we must be "twice-born," because we are separated by our common sin from our essential natures, from our true role and status as symbols, and so precisely from an awareness of and life within that continued divine presence. Here arises, then, a second sense of the word "symbol," namely, those special and unique finite media through which a particular revelation of the ultimate and the sacred, universally present but universally obscured as well, is now manifested in a particular form to a historical community, and so through which a group becomes newly aware of its own status as symbol (in the first sense), as existing in and through the power of the divine. It is through the Son made flesh that the Spirit descends again upon the community. In our tradition the originating symbols in this second sense, symbols of special revelation, or of redemptive grace, are the history of the community of Israel and the person of Jesus.

The estrangement of natural existence from its natural personal and communal life—surely as predominant an aspect of our secular experience as it is of our dogmatic theology—explains the dual, ambiguous

relation of religious symbols to the cultural symbols with which we began. For this estrangement means that our social symbols themselves—those notions that, for example, structure and maintain the American way of life and that, heaven help us, relate us in most of our life to ultimacy—are, though real and pervasive enough, by no means “natural” in the real sense of that word. That is, they themselves reflect our estrangement from our authentic selves and from authentic community as deeply as does our concrete behavior, and they reflect this because they imply no real self, no real relations, no real community, and above all no real relation to the ultimacy on which we all depend. Thus, while social symbols exemplify and communicate reality, meaning, and power, they exemplify and create distorted forms of human life, and must therefore be judged and transformed from beyond themselves.

In the divine economy one of the strange purposes of human social history is the creation, embodiment, testing, judging, and transformation of such systems of social symbols; and one of the crucial roles of the Christian liturgical community is not only to draw to *itself* the power and vitality resident in the structures of ordinary life, but also in creative and prophetic outward response to criticize and refine the social symbols within which ordinary life is lived. The liturgical community can do this through the criteria of its own symbolic understanding of authentic humanity and authentic community as manifested in Jesus and the kingdom; for they represent the promised fulfilment of our human history of social creativity and social estrangement. In any case, returning to our theme, the universal fact of alienation requires a second level of symbol, namely, a particular, finite medium as incarnating at once the essential nature of the *humanum*, of human community, and of their eschatological fulfilment.

### *Third Level of Symbolic Mediation*

In each tradition this presence of the divine in and through special revelatory events and persons is over time communicated to the continuing community founded upon that special presence. This communication over time is in turn achieved through “symbols” in a third sense. Again, finite entities have become media which point to, recall, and reintroduce by representation the originating presence of the holy in the revelatory symbols creative of that tradition. Such tertiary symbols are infinitely various in religion; in our tradition they are most importantly composed of communal acts and elements (sacraments) on the one hand, and spoken and reflected words on the other (kerygma, didache, and the theological symbols which further reflection draws from such, e.g., creation, providence, incarnation, etc.). Both sacrament and

word are essential if our theological understanding of the divine presence is correct. Ultimacy is present in our living and being human, in the totality of our existence, not just in our minds and consciences. This ontological presence of the holy can be brought to awareness and recommunicated to us only through media which are as we are, and which analogically also communicate our being to us: water, bread, and wine. On the other hand, the presence of the holy is hidden in the finite, or incognito, in ourselves and in these special media. Its presence must be evoked for us by a word that penetrates through the creaturely vehicle to the transcendent that appears within it, and so a word that brings that transcendent dimension to our personal awareness—whether it be the transcendent at work in a historical event, in a sacramental element, or in our own existence. Sacrament and word, ontological presence and kerygma, are essentially and yet dialectically interrelated in communicating the divine presence.

In turn, our awareness of and response to the presence of the sacred—which is the heart of the problem of worship as response to the holy—combines these three senses of the word “symbol.” All Christian worship points to and finds its center in the revelatory events or symbols originative of that tradition, to the word in prophecy and Word made flesh. Correspondingly, the role of the tertiary symbols is to accomplish that pointing and centering, the sacraments of baptism and Eucharist with all of their manifold of symbolic power re-presenting to us and in us these originating events, and the kerygma or proclamation opening up to us the transcendent meaning of these events and so calling us to decision and commitment in relation to them. The classical forms of Christian worship, Catholic and Protestant, have emphasized, and often overemphasized to the exclusion of the other, one or the other of these two forms of tertiary symbol.

I suspect, however, that the present weakness of both classical forms of Christian worship lies not so much in this traditional overemphasis of each as in their common indifference to the third meaning of symbol as we have delineated it, and the crucial relation in worship of the other two meanings to this primary one, namely, that the divine works in and on us as creatures too, and that awareness of this our role as symbols—in our being, our meanings, our decisions, and our hopes—lies at the heart of any experience of the holy that is to be relevant to and effective in us. Our argument is that, unless the symbols of our tradition in word and sacrament are brought into relation to the ultimacy that permeates our ordinary life, unless traditional symbols reawaken in us our role as symbols of the divine activity, there is no experience of the holy. The Spirit must speak in and through us, and must reawaken us to *our* role

as symbols, if the Father is to be known through the Son. In a secular age when ordinary life is separated in its self-understanding from its own transcendent ground, sacramental symbols unrelated to the transcendent dimension of our own existence in life become magical or merely traditional, and kerygmatic symbols change into empty theologisms or anachronistic signs of our moral and intellectual autonomy.

To be alive, religious symbols must provide shape and thematization to the patterns of ordinary life; correspondingly, natural, secular life must receive its fundamental forms from these symbols, and not from our "normal" but distorted ones, if it is to achieve its own essential goodness. God is already there in our existence as its ultimate ground and its ultimate goal. The role of sacrament and word alike is not so much to insert the divine activity into nature, into the ordinary course of our lives, as to bring that prior relation forth in awareness and to give it the shape, power, and form of Jesus Christ. (The clue to renewed worship, as of a renewed Christian existence and theology, in so far as by reflection we can take hold of these matters, is to reappropriate through the forms of Christian symbolism the presence of the holy in the totality of ordinary existence.) For the goal of worship is to reawaken through concentrated expression (an expression formed by Jesus Christ) our awareness of the ultimacy that grounds and permeates our entire existence, an awareness in all of our existence of our role as symbols of the divine being, logos, and love—a veritable participation in the life of the Trinity, but a participation that is the fulfilment of our nature as human beings rather than a translation of that nature to a higher sphere.

As is obvious, essential to the view here presented is the affirmation of a parallelism or correlation, as well as a crucial distinction, between the workings of the holy in and on us in our daily secular life and the deeper meanings of the Christian symbols or doctrines, and so between life in the world and worship, between general and special revelation, nature and grace, God as creative providence and God as redeemer. Thus do the symbols (in senses two and three) of our faith manifest to us our own status and role as by nature symbols (in sense one) or creatures. And thus in turn does our ordinary experience, apprehended in its ultimate dimension, give to our Christian worship its life, relevance, and power.

Also essential to this view is the affirmation that while grace in and through Jesus Christ (what we called the secondary level of symbol) brings something radically new and utterly unmerited into our ordinary existence, it does so only because of our fallen state, our separation from God and from our own natures in the exclusively autonomous rather than theonomous character of our lives. It is not to make up for a lack in our created nature that the unmerited and surprising grace communicated to

us by the special revelation in Jesus Christ comes to us, but to overcome the distortion we have made in our natures and so in our history. Redemption fulfils creation; it does not transform it into something else or even something "higher," as if to fulfil our created human natures and to liberate men and women in their historic existence were not high enough goals for human lives, and as if that human goal did not have its own genuine glory in being at one and the same time a creative creature and also a symbol of the divine activity in history. But we must add that in refashioning our human being into its own created structure and purpose as such a symbol, grace also thereby projects us into a new future—of ourselves and of history—which itself has a goal far beyond that of a mere repetition or even a restoration of the temporal past. Directedness towards an eschatological goal is the essential nature of both divine and human being, and so again grace in no way transcends nature but rather makes its realization and fulfilment possible.

#### WORD AND SACRAMENT

Let me close this discussion with a few remarks about word and sacrament in the new setting of a worship oriented not just towards a special religious sphere, the two-zone view, but as the ground, critic, and inspirer of the secular sphere, the ordinary life-world of men. Since the Enlightenment it has been frequently assumed that with the growth of autonomy, self-consciousness, and subjectivity in modern culture, the Protestant principle of the word addressed to intellect and conscience would slowly displace the anachronistic, materialistic, and "magical" Catholic sacramental principle. And there is not a little in recent modern Catholic liturgical reforms—most of which I heartily approve—that might seem to agree: the emphasis on the vernacular, on personal participation by the laity, on biblical sermons, and the like. I would like to dispute this general view of the decline of the Catholic principle, however, and unless such a caveat is too paradoxical from a free churchman, to assert in our day the *priority* of the sacramental in Christian liturgy—after saying some of the reasons why the Protestant principle of the word is also important for us all.

The most fundamental reasons for the word we have already supplied: the transcendence of deity and the integrity of the finite. Thus, when the divine is either active in the life-world or present in specifically liturgical action, its presence is "hidden" within the finite media. There are few visible theophanies in our traditions; thus, unless that presence had been proclaimed and interpreted, as is clear in both the prophetic and the apostolic traditions, it would have remained incognito to those who witnessed the events and to us who ponder them. Further, it is neither the visible creaturely medium itself to which faith is directed, nor even

the transcendent in and of itself. Rather, faith addresses itself to the two in dialectical conjunction, as covenant, law, and Christology made plain. Thus it is the word of witness alone that directs us beyond the medium to the holy present within it. Without the principle of the word, the sacramental principle of presence is always in danger of confounding the sacred and its medium, of relinquishing therefore both the transcendence and sacrality of deity and the autonomy and integrity of the creature. This identification of the finite medium with the sacred transcendent to it has been fatal at every point that it has appeared in Church history—when ecclesiastical media and sacred grace, or doctrinal media and divine truth, canon law and the divine will, were confounded—but it would be especially so in the secular context we envisage if the sacred were identified with the creaturely symbol as such, with ourselves, our community, and our social world.

The word thus is necessary, secondly, as the principle of judgment on the estranged character of all human life, even life lived in the presence of deity; for the servants of God are by their very closeness to deity the most prone to identify themselves with it. The word is that in revelation which manifests the infinite qualitative difference between holy and profane, and between the sacred and its medium, and thus in judging brings the only grounds for hope for a reduction of that difference.

Finally, the word addresses uniquely the inward and the temporal spirit of man; sacramental presence is fundamental to our faith, as I shall argue, but that presence is both inward and personal—and so must be spoken—and it is proleptic, a promise for the future. And neither the grace of judgment, forgiveness, acceptance, and justification, nor the eschatological promises, can be communicated except by speaking the personal word.

Lest this seem, however, to end in a Protestant peroration, let me say that to me the Catholic principle of sacramental presence, taken in its epistemological and ontological as well as its liturgical scope, is basic to our faith. This is, I take it, obvious from all I have said. After all, the theory of revelation enunciated here is a sacramental and not a verbal theory of divine manifestation, in which the divine presence in a multitude of forms and modes, rather than the “divine speech,” is regarded as the ontologically and epistemologically prior level of revelation. Incidentally, the essential and prior character of the principle of sacramental presence must be asserted not only against Protestant theologians of divine speech but presently also against the siren calls to the best Catholic theologians to abandon the divine presence in past and present and to “speak” only of an eschatological presence to come in the future—a theology of the word alone with a vengeance even when connected to Catholic ontologists!

All I have said about the divine presence throughout experience, at every corner of our life-world, and about our role as symbols—in our being, our meanings and work, our relations, our goals, our movement into the future—indicates that the possibility of meaningful theological speech, and so of the word itself, depends upon our awareness of that sacramental presence. No God of the future can be promised meaningfully to us, and no future kingdom can be relevant to what we do politically today, unless there is that presence already at work in our common life. Sacramental presence, the divine activity in and through all of creative process, precedes and grounds word and promise alike, as Catholicism preceded and grounded the personal and autonomous forms of Protestantism.

This is, however, not merely a matter of grounding; no great tradition likes to feel like a basement, however essential to the upper floors. My further point is that the character of modern culture calls more for a Catholic and so sacramental principle of mediation than it does for the Protestant verbal principle; this is why I emphasize it everywhere. Ours is an age in which all that is historical is relative; thus all speech, words, concepts, propositions, dogmas, laws, and forms of liturgy are to us historically relative, pinioned in their medieval epoch, subject to qualification, infinitely human and so contestable. Ours is also an age fortunately reawakened to the intimacy of the relations of body to spirit, of the spirituality of the bodily and the sensual. The sensory and the aesthetic are thus for us again, after centuries, possible media of spiritual insight.

Again the word alone, addressed to intellect and conscience, is inadequate. With sacramental media, on the other hand, we can recognize the finite and relative character of the media and not lose the mediation; "symbol" is a better word than either "dogma" or "doctrine" on this point. Sacramental mediation more naturally than verbal can relate us to the absolute and unconditioned by means of relative symbols, for the symbol both participates in the relativity of the creaturely world from which it arises and communicates an infinity in which it participates. Such mediation, moreover, can relate us to ultimacy through a wide variety of symbolic forms: verbal, conceptual, active, aesthetic, bodily. A Catholicism that has learned to relinquish its Catholic absolutism and had the courage to recognize the new world of relativity—the relativity of its institutional structures, of its ecclesiastical hierarchy, its dogmatic formulations, its canon law, its liturgical forms—and yet that as catholic and sacramental can relate grace and the wondrous width of divine activity through a multitude of media to the total life-world of men and women, this Catholicism may well find itself



more relevant to modern needs, more creative in the modern situation, and less anachronistic to modern sensibilities than is any form of Protestantism. Strangely, in denying or abjuring—or being forced by twentieth-century historical consciousness to do so—the great temptation of a sacramental form of religion to absolutize the relative and so sanctify the ambiguous, Catholicism may discover the vast strength of a sacramental form of religion, namely, the divinely granted capacity to allow finite and relative instruments to be media of the divine and so to endow all of secular and ordinary life with the possibility and so the sanctity of divine creativity, and thus more than Protestantism to bring Christianity alive, well, and active through the turmoil of the modern world.

If Catholicism, or Protestantism, is to achieve this task of mediating the divine grounding, the divine judgment, and the divine possibility to our entire secular existence, it must widen the scope of both word and sacrament far beyond their present religious, ecclesiastical, dogmatic, and *merely* “redemptive” limits. If, for example, the word is to provide through the proclamation and teaching of verbal and notional symbols the basis for all of our existence, personal, social, and historical, our understanding of those symbols must include their relation to the social, public life of man, as well as to his individual virtues and vices, weals and woes. The proclaimed word must intersect, in judgment and approbation, in critical analysis and deep support, the whole realm of social symbolism and of social behavior we analyzed, a relation of deep and dangerously potential idolatry on the one hand, but on the other the necessary condition for creative human life, since we humans cannot *be* at all, especially in a divine kingdom, without a symbolic social structure. As Augustine said, every state strives for ultimate peace and justice, and then fails, establishing at best only a perverted peace, a perverted justice, and an incomplete humanity. To refashion our social world into an approximation of the promised kingdom and thus to help in the liberation of men and women is one of the major themes of the gospel and so one of the major tasks of the Church catholic. Only thus can it be creative in a secular world. And a world moving deeper and deeper into a dehumanizing technology, into fundamental shifts of world power, into the new nightmare of scanty resources will need all the humanizing of its social structures it can get.

Even more needs to be done to widen the scope or range of the sacraments. Ideally, the sacramental system of an unfallen church (is such a notion conceivable?) would mediate the divine grace to every facet of natural life, to all the major stages, crises, and points of intense meaning of our ongoing life-world. Thus in a sacramental universe the

sacraments would bring to explicit expression at appropriate points the divine presence in all of life, as the divine word would mediate the divine judgment and mercy to all the issues of common human life.

And yet look at the sacraments, all seven of them! This is not what they do, or even seek to do, at all. Rather, in their classical form they relate the divine presence not to human life generally and in its natural course but only to human beings as they enter *ecclesia*, the covenant community, the special and separate realm of redemption, the churchly realm of grace. Baptism is not at all a sacrament of birth, of the divine gift of being, of life, of human existence, though our faith and our creed emphasize the centrality of the divine creation. On the contrary, baptism is solely a sacrament of the forgiveness of sins and of entrance not into the *human* but into the *religious* community! What a strange Marcionic vision within a Catholic system that names God "being," and then acts sacramentally as if the divine gift of being were secular and not worthy of sacramental notice! Confirmation, the Christian rite of initiation, is not with us a rite of entrance into adulthood and the adult community, a sacrament celebrating, blessing, and molding the divine gift of human autonomy and responsibility and so of adult and responsible community—as if these were purely secular at their heart. Rather, confirmation represents solely the entrance into Mother Church, as if there for the first time we met the divine presence. How strange again that a Catholic system should contest the Enlightenment secularization of human autonomy and responsibility, and then reduplicate that very secularization in its sacramental system! And the sacrament of ordination or of orders: here is the blessed sacrament of vocation, of the divine gift of meaningful activity in the world and for the neighbor, and thus for God and His kingdom. Do we clerics alone do this work in and through our *religious* tasks? Does the creative activity of our lay or secular brethren, an activity instrumental in increasing the kingdom as we now define it, namely, as a social order of liberation, justice, and humanity, then derive not at all from the divine power and purpose? Are divine orders *only* clerical?

Theologically and ethically we proclaim that the meaning of the gospel and the task of the Church is that of liberating and humanizing God's world, and we define the eschatological promises in that light. Yet, as we see, our sacraments fail to point us in this direction, towards the world and its life. A similar analysis could be made, obviously, of marriage, penance, and unction: again, each in principle directed at central issues of human existence but traditionally concerned only with the way those issues appear, or reappear, in the special covenant community of grace. The Eucharist needs no redirection, for in mediating the presence of the

risen Lord in the communion it is the center; but it needs, I believe, freeing, its scope needs an infinite widening and extension over the whole earth. And this widening could, I suggest, be the special role of the other sacraments, namely, to relate not only (as traditionally) to rebirth but also to birth, not only to life in the *ecclesia* but to life in God's world, and thus to help mediate the divine presence to all of life as it moves into God's future.

This widening of the scope and range of liturgy and sacramental action is not at all a matter of relinquishing the sacramental relation to rebirth in Christ and so also to life in the covenant community. This essential tie with special revelation, with Christology, redemptive grace, and ecclesiology, represents that continuity with tradition which we lose at our peril. Rather, this widening of scope is a matter of realizing anew and afresh—and possibly for the first time in Church history—that rebirth in the covenant community is in no way ultimately separate or divorced from being human, from achieving and fulfilling the *humanum*, and thus is also intrinsically related to birth, to human autonomy and responsibility, to our human relationships, to our human vocations, and our human death as expressions of the mode of their perfection.

The eschatological fulfilment of Christ's existence, given in promise in the classical sacraments, is also and primarily the fulfilment of our life in the world as simply men and women; to become one with Christ in the loving community is to become one with God and so one with one's neighbor in the world. And so to become at last human. Thus each sacrament has, so to speak, a multiple reference: first to its eschatological perfections, then to its partial fulfilment in the life of the Church, and finally its possibility—and more than mere possibility—in the life of all of us in the world as humans, to *our* role and status as symbols, in all the stages and modes of our life, of the divine being, the divine truth, and the divine love. It is this wider reference to our life as human in the world that in our liturgy might represent the radical *discontinuity* with tradition necessary in our situation; for it is this reference to the sacred quality of the secular that our liturgy desperately needs for its realization and validity, and in order that it may fulfil its task of sanctifying and liberating the world's life. Entrance into the center of the secular life-world is a necessity for a reinvigoration, as it is the criterion for a reassessment and reshaping, of the Catholic tradition and the Catholic liturgy in secular America.