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Sign, Symbol, Initiatory Sacrament



In his essay "Sign and Symbol" in *Ransoming the Time*, Jacques Maritain devotes a scant five paragraphs to the special problem of the sacraments in a semiotic context. In this paper, I would like to take Maritain's sketch of sacramental sign and apply it to a semiotic account of the three sacraments of initiation: baptism, confirmation, and the Eucharist. To perform this application, I will refer to the standard ecclesiastical presentation of the three sacraments found in *The Catechism of the Catholic Church*.

I. Semiotic Theory

Maritain situates his theory of the sacraments within his broader consideration of the practical sign. In developing his theory of the practical sign, Maritain follows the Aristotelian-Thomistic distinction between the speculative and the practical intellect. "The good proper to the speculative intellect is purely and simply the true; the good proper to the practical intellect is the true as leading to right action. In one way or another—that is to say, for reasons and to degrees which differ greatly with cases—the practical intellect presupposes the will; its object, in so far as it is known as object, is something to be put into existence, something to be made concrete in action."¹ The emphasis of this definition of the practical sign on will and action recurs in Maritain's treatment of the particular problems associated with the status of the sacrament.

In his consideration of the sacrament, Maritain treats it as the preem-

1. Jacques Maritain, *Ransoming the Time*, translated by Harry Lorin Binsse (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1941), 222.

inent and exceptional example of the practical sign. “[The sacrament] is a practical sign ordered to interior sanctification... Being something external and sensory which signifies an effect of interior sanctification to be produced, it is a conventional sign founded in fact on a certain analogy (a practical symbol.)”² In this definition, the sacrament is more than a practical sign; it is a practical symbol, inasmuch as there is an analogical resemblance between the external sensate face of the sacrament and the transformation it is designed to effect. The water of baptism is thus a symbol of the purification from sin, not simply the sign of such a spiritual liberation. The sacrament is distinguished from most other practical signs by its unique focus on an internal transformation, even if this transformation has clear consequences in social action.

The sacrament also raises unique problems of authorship and authority. Maritain insists on the broad spectrum of sacramental instances. In this conception, there are “natural” sacraments, the sacraments of the Old Law (Judaism), and the sacraments of the New Law (Christianity). All enjoy divine authority but in different modes. In the natural sacraments, present in societies outside the reach of the divine law, the civil authorities often establish rites of a religious nature to encourage growth in natural virtues by its members. Maritain insists that such natural sacraments reflect a real but indirect and easily distorted divine inspiration.

The sacraments of the Old Law are instituted by the direct and pure inspiration of God. Such Jewish rites as circumcision, the sacerdotal anointing of the Aaronic priest, and the celebration of the Passover meal are authentic sacraments, instituted by God to bring about internal sanctification of those who participate in them. Nonetheless, the efficacy of the sacraments of the Old Law is limited. Of themselves, these sacraments do not confer the spiritual transformation they signify; rather, by offering persuasive external signs, they encourage the devout participant to pursue the moral and spiritual goods they represent. (In passing, it should be noted that Maritain’s sympathetic and detailed defense of the properly sacramental nature and supernatural source of the rites of the Mosaic law is very much of a piece with his combat against anti-Semitism, prominent in other essays in *Ransoming the Time*, notably “The Mystery of Israel.”³)

The sacraments of the New Law distinguish themselves by their unique

2. Ibid., 225.

3. See *ibid.*, 141–79.

efficaciousness. They represent such an unusual type of practical sign that they break apart the category of sign itself. "Not only are "the sacraments [of the New Law] sacraments; they are sacraments in a super-eminent manner; they effect that which they signify.... This comes to be by virtue of the superabundance coming forth from Christ's passion, and because the major element in the new Law is the grace of the Spirit operating from within. The sacramental sign is no longer merely a *practical* sign; it becomes an *instrumental cause* of which the very Cause of being makes use to produce grace in the soul, just as an artist makes use of the violin or flute to produce beauty. And to be thus a cause (instrumental) is extrinsic to the idea of the sign, even of the practical sign."⁴ Through its divinely authored capacity to cause what it signifies, the New-Law sacrament breaks the limits of moral invitation which hedge about other practical signs, even those of a natural or Old-Law sacramentality. Given his longstanding aesthetic concerns, Maritain interprets the sacrament's efficaciousness through an artistic, specifically a musical, analogy.

The Eucharist represents the summit of this sign-breaking efficaciousness of the sacrament to effect what it signifies. The Eucharist does not operate on the basis of a physical resemblance between its external signifiers (bread and wine) and its internal significance (the Body and Blood of Christ). Rather, it effects an ontological change (through transubstantiation) which has no parallels in nature or even in the other sacraments. "Far from resting upon an identity between the sign and the signified, the sacrament of the Eucharist adds to the relationship of sign to signified that of cause to effect and implies the intervention of the first Cause producing the most radical change we can conceive, a change which affects being in so far as it is being."⁵

Despite its supernatural realism and account of divine efficaciousness, Maritain's account of the sacrament does not ignore the question of human will, which he posits as central to the exercise of all practical signs. Although, when properly celebrated, the sacraments effect what they signify, their proper grace can only be received "if the subject does not put obstacles in their way by his contrary disposition."⁶ Sacramental efficaciousness is thus in no way comparable to magic, a predominantly imaginary form of spiritual instrumentality severed from questions of moral disposition and

4. *Ibid.*, 226.

6. *Ibid.*

5. *Ibid.*

one which Maritain treats at length in the closing section of his meditation on sign and symbol.

II. Sacrament and Initiation

Maritain's theory of the sacraments can provide a useful grid for understanding the semiotic and symbolic dimension of the sacraments of initiation. Conversely, the *Catechism's* treatment of the initiatory trinity of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist can complement and expand the sacramental theory outlined by Maritain in *Ransoming the Time*.

The *Catechism's* opening treatment of the sacraments in general stresses their symbolic nature. Like Maritain, the text emphasizes the analogy between the natural world and the supernatural world represented by the sacraments. "The seven sacraments touch all the stages and all the important moments of Christian life: they give birth and increase, healing and mission to the Christian's life of faith. There is thus a certain resemblance between the stages of natural life and the stages of the spiritual life."⁷

In its treatment of baptism, the *Catechism* stresses how the external sign of water used in the sacrament is rooted in a faith-inspired view of water in the divine economy of salvation; the link to nature as such is minimal. The water of baptism is tied to the waters of creation in Genesis, of the great flood, of the exodus of Israel from Egypt, of the baptism preached by John the Baptist, and of the baptism of Christ in the Jordan. Baptism thus appears as more of a conventional (specifically ecclesial) than a natural sign of purification. Grasping the nature of baptism's use of water to signify purification from sin requires an understanding of how God has used water in analogous episodes of creation, redemption, purification, and mission in the history of salvation. Outside this faith-based framework of reference, the external rite of baptism easily becomes a simple enigma to the onlooker. It is in this context that one can grasp how the plunging into the waters of baptism represents a spiritual immersion into the death and resurrection of Christ and how baptism "signifies and realizes the death to sin and the entry into the life of the Most Holy Trinity through configuration to the paschal mystery of Christ."⁸

Like Maritain, the *Catechism* stresses the internal purification effected

7. *Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC)* (New York: Doubleday, 1995), no. 1210.

8. CCC, no. 1239.

by the celebration of baptism. In particular, it emphasizes how baptism infuses the theological virtues, empowers the new Christian through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and strengthens the pursuit of the moral virtues by the baptized. But it also describes the external, social dimension of the effects of baptism. Through baptism, the Christian enters upon the mission proper to the common priesthood of all believers. Baptism must be expressed by participation in the various external apostolates proper to the Church. This stress on the external mission conferred by baptism on the Christian carries the echoes of Maritain's emphasis on the will and action as central to the operation of all practical signs, even if Maritain's presentation of the finality of the sacrament remains confined to a narrower category of internal sanctification.

In its treatment of confirmation, the *Catechism* treats the external sign of the sacrament in a more naturalistic account of symbol. The action of anointing with oil is interpreted in the light of both ancient and biblical history. It emerges as a natural symbol of a substance and action which cleanses, limbers, heals, and polishes. The external sign appropriately points to the spiritual cleansing, healing, consecration, and burnishing which the sacrament effects in the soul. The external sealing with oil points to the internal sealing in the Holy Spirit which confirmation operates.

As in its treatment of baptism, the *Catechism's* account of confirmation delineates the external as well as internal effects of the sacrament. Internally, the sacrament unites the believer more firmly to Christ and increases the gifts of the Holy Spirit within the soul. Externally, it propels the believer to "spread and defend the faith by word and action as true witnesses of Christ, to confess the name of Christ boldly, and never to be ashamed of the Cross."⁹ One might well regret the post-conciliar abandonment of the old complementary gesture of the episcopal slap on the cheek, which underscored the price of this militant witness to the faith before the contempt of the world.

In its presentation of the Eucharist, the *Catechism* reverts to a more biblical interpretation of the external signs used in the sacrament. While the text briefly cites the generic status of bread and wine as "fruit of the earth and of the vine,"¹⁰ echoing the prayers of the Offertory, it devotes far greater attention to the roots of this bread and wine in the history of

9. CCC, no. 1303.

10. CCC, no. 1333.

salvation. In particular, it evokes the centrality of bread and wine in the redemptive history of Israel: the bread of the Passover meal, the manna in the desert, the cup of blessing in Jewish feasts. Like Maritain's insistence on the authenticity of the sacraments of the Old Law, the *Catechism's* catalogue of the Eucharist's precedents in Judaism emphasizes the deep and precise roots of even the external signs of the Eucharist in the economy of Israel, especially in its experience of the Exodus. It also stresses the link to the miracles of Christ. The Eucharistic bread echoes the multiplication of the loaves while the wine echoes the transformation of the water into wine at Cana.

Despite the rich biblical echoes of its external signs, the Eucharist effects a reality which transcends the feeble external signs. Through the epiclesis and words of institution, the priest transforms the bread and wine into the substance of the Body and Blood of Christ. The unique sacrifice of Christ on the cross becomes present in the church's sacrifice of thanksgiving and praise. In its supernatural transformation of the external signs it employs, the Eucharist operates its effect in a manner markedly different from the other sacraments. It is this preeminence in divine authorship and efficaciousness that constitutes the Eucharist as the source and goal of the other sacraments.

The *Catechism's* account of the fruits of proper reception of the Eucharist emphasizes how the internal transformation wrought by the sacrament alters the communicant's relationship to society and to the future. Internally, the Eucharist augments union with Christ, charity, opposition to sin, and union with the Church. Externally, it frees the communicant to embrace the neighbor in several specific ways. The Eucharist strengthens commitment to the poor. "To receive in truth the Body and Blood given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren."¹¹ It also commits the communicant to work for the unity of Christians. "The more painful the experience of the divisions in the Church which break the common participation in the table of the Lord, the more urgent are our prayers to the Lord that the time of unity among all who believe in Him may return."¹²

The Eucharist also reorients the believer's relationship to the future. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the believer looks forward to the comple-

11. CCC, no. 1397.

12. CCC, no. 1398.

tion of the Eucharistic sacrifice in the heavenly kingdom of God. "If the Eucharist is the memorial of the Passover of the Lord Jesus, if by our communion at the altar we are filled 'with every heavenly blessing and grace,' then the Eucharist is also an anticipation of the heavenly glory."¹³ The internal sanctification wrought by the sacrament thus alters the communicant's relationship to time as well as to space. A greater love of the neighbor and a greater hope in the final triumph of God's kingdom emerge as the fruits of worthy reception.

III. Conclusion

To conclude, Maritain's semiotic treatment of the sacraments in *Ransoming the Time* permits us to grasp something of the signification and symbolism inherent in the sacramental acts of the church. Ratifying certain of Maritain's insights, the *Catechism* permits us to recognize a broader social finality to the sacraments' grace and to grasp how deeply even the external signs of the sacrament are rooted in an ecclesial memory of the economy of salvation. Perhaps Maritain's most significant contribution to semiotic discussions of the sacraments is to remind us how the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, ultimately defy the limits of even the most robust religious signs and symbols. At a certain moment, semiotic analysis must yield to adoration.

13. CCC, no. 1402.