

Exploring the Sacraments Appreciating God's Presence

Anthony Kain

I wrote this book in 1993, some time ago now.

Whilst there are details I would now change the unity of the book stands.

I offer it on our Parish web-site at the suggestion of parishioners at a meeting preparing with their children for the completion of Initiation with the sacraments of Confirmation and First Communion.

It is to invite people to reflect on the great gift and secret that the sacramental life of the Church is.

You might care to read a chapter or two.

It may prove helpful if you are:

- **parents of infants preparing for baptism,**
- **parents of young people preparing for Confirmation and First Communion,**
- **a couple preparing for marriage,**
- **a person thinking about the "otherness" and mystery of life"**
- **a person thinking of entering on the Christian journey**

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Introduction

God's Presence in Word and Spirit.

The unexamined life is not worth living
Socrates

We can start thinking about sacraments by focusing on *how* God is present. This book looks at the specific idea that God's presence is revealed in two complementary ways: in Jesus, the Word of God, who is God in the flesh who lived among us, and as Spirit, God's energy dwelling in us and in the world around us. We use Sacraments to appreciate God's presence in these two modes.

We can speak of God's presence in ordinary every day events of our lives: our experiences, our relationships, the circumstances in which we find ourselves. These are *Traces of God*. We are not always aware of this Presence, this personal God, who is constantly breaking into our lives as Word and Spirit. Sacraments seek to remedy that gap in our awareness - they keep reminding us to appreciate the reality of our lives in God. God is already there. There is a spiritual movement of our lives, our world toward sacrament.

Sacramental celebrations show us one very good way of being aware, of 'appreciating God's presence'. I have often called them, among other things, 'awareness exercises'. They invite us to be *fully aware* by helping us to reflect on the meaning of what is going on in life's experiences - even the bad, difficult ones, as well as the joyful, pleasurable ones and by calling us to new moments of grace, the knowledge of a living and loving God present in our lives.

Sacraments help us reflect so that events and relationships are appreciated with deep meaning that Jesus can give us. The God of Jesus was revealed as a down-to-earth, creative, personal God who replaces condemnation, judgment, hate, confusion, bitterness, destructiveness, revenge with compassion, understanding, patience, love, and forgiveness.

Sacraments are *the celebration* of the discovery of this God and the meaning this God gives to our lives in Jesus. They speak a real Word to us, the WORD OF GOD, and use the language of SYMBOLS to express the real presence of this creative God.

Sacraments are also *the invitation* to discover life's meaning and the God of Jesus. They offer us a new moment of Grace, an appreciation of the Living and Loving God present to us. As we go on our life's journey, they speak to us of the indwelling SPIRIT.

This book seeks to explore this meaning and the language of our Sacramental life as we begin by looking at God and the presence of God in Jesus and the Church (Sections 1-4). We will offer a broad understanding of sacramentality. We will speak of each of the classic "seven" sacraments of the Catholic Tradition (Sections 5-10) and how they gather together in the moment of dying, death and their Rites (Section 10). The conclusion speaks of the dynamism of Sacramental Life. The Journey theme will help us with all this.

In Sections 4-10 we examine what the WORD of God says about a particular sacrament; we explore the SYMBOLS used to express the presence of God breaking into our life; we speak of the RITE of the Church that expresses the God present in Word and Spirit. Some pastoral, or historical or theological notes will be interspersed through each discussion showing something of the interdisciplinary approach used in sacramental theology today.

There is a Chinese proverb "May you live in interesting times". Some argue whether it is a blessing or a curse! The movement and renewal in the Church in recent years makes now an interesting time. There has been a challenging dialogue in sacramental theology between *what is actually done* and *what should be done*. We live in an interesting time that is engaged with key issues like:

- the role of the Spirit who can move us from passive ritual to a more dynamic Sacramental life;
- the challenge of the social, communal dimension of sacramental life, that goes hand in hand with the personal, individual dimension.
- the cultural context of sacraments that leads people to challenge each cultural system and its values,
- the competency of the symbolic language of sacraments that leads us to *full, active, conscious participation*.

A journey has a unity about it. One of the problems when talking about the sacraments is that we tend to separate them out and talk of each of them separately. It is better to see them as linked to one another as parts and elements, aspects of the one journey of the life of faith. So take this book as a unit rather than as separate sections. All the chapters and ideas lean on one another for support.

Anthony Kain

Adelaide 1993.

1. The God Whose Presence We Appreciate.

*When I look at your heavens,
the work of your fingers
.....what are human beings
that you are mindful of them?
Psalm 8.*

When I look up at the sky on a starry night I wonder and am caught up in mystery, looking out at the vastness of it all.

Ever since human persons started to wonder and reflect about meaning in the journey of life they have discovered a life '*beyond*'. People could have lived superficially yet they knew, with Socrates, that 'the unexamined life is not worth living'. Questions arose that caught up individuals and societies in *mystery*; questions about the events of life and death, love and hate, sickness and health, hunger and nourishment. These are ultimate questions that no one can really ever escape. They usually catch us somewhere, sometime in the circumstances of life. We resonate with 'I want to be there when everyone suddenly understands what it has all been for' (from Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*).

Ancient peoples sought to understand 'what it has all been for' by relating to the mysterious side of life. They gave names to the divine realm and its inhabitants. Anthropology is full of their discoveries.

People from many cultural traditions thought that this other realm could be known through a life of spirit which makes it possible for the human realm and the "divine" realm to intersect, to be reconciled, to reveal meaning.

From Australian Aboriginal 'dreaming', the mythologies of Mesopotamia, and all the great religions of the world have done this. Even modern mythologies like the Star Wars series suggest such an intersection of life, e.g.; with the statement 'The Force be with you!'

For Christians this questioning and the intersecting of human life with the 'mystery of life is known and celebrated in the person and life of Jesus. ' What it has all been for' is found in Jesus. And Jesus can be found in the Christian community and in celebrations. Jesus can be found in the life of the Spirit who enables us to appreciate the revelation that sacramental life offers us.

In a world that has put science on a pedestal and which has so much trust in rational thought alone, sacramental practices can be accused of being naive, even childish, a 'Linus blanket', or magic. Yet the deepest realities can only be, and are, expressed in symbol and sacrament.

We pour water over a child and proclaim that the child lives forever. We lay hands on and anoint a sick person with oil and say that the Spirit of our Healing God is with them. We eat a morsel of bread and drink a sip of wine and we say we are united with God and one another.

These are, indeed, very ordinary, simple things to do. Yet their meaning and reality is far from simple. To a person, moved by the Spirit and with the eyes of faith, the sacramental ritual can make present a God who enhances and enriches life and its quest for meaning. There is a moment of grace, of appreciating the living and loving presence of God.

For this to happen an *openness* to revelation and the Spirit of God active in life is required. One could say that such an openness is a prerequisite to understanding the thoughts of this book. The Spirit leads us to such an openness as, in faith, we enter into the realm of word, symbols of Jesus, *the Word* and *Holy Wisdom* within us.

Further Reading

Edwards, Denis *The Human Experience of God*. Paulist Press, New York 1983. An exploration of the connection between the human experience of mystery and the God of the Christian Gospel.

2. Symbolism: The Language of Sacramental Life.

"Symbols give rise to thought"
Paul Ricoeur.

I look down at a baby cradled in my arms and I feel warm and loving towards this small child. I smile at him. And he smiles back at me. The baby has seen my smile; he interprets it and responds. I get a great thrill because for the first time he has recognised and responded to me. I know it is not just wind! We are in the world of symbol. We are in the world of love. We are 'speaking', communicating, through a symbol. The symbol indicates that I am happy to be with you, to be holding you, to be held by you, I have confidence in you, I find joy in you, in you I am content. It says so many things; it is *inexhaustible in its meanings*.

In that relationship with the baby I am in a realm *beyond rational thought* and I "know" the communication between us speaks more powerfully than rational thought. I know because I cannot really rationally explain it to another. I am caught up in a depth of powerful and life giving meaning

It is like when I go to the funeral of the parent of a friend of mine. I want to approach my friend, but what do I say? I am caught in a need for which rational words are inadequate, so I go up to my friend and look into her eyes, sharing her grief and all I can do is just hug her and hold her for a moment. "All I can do", "just" - we tend to be-little such actions, to see them as inferior to the spoken, rational approach. Yet in this moment with my friend I have communicated in ways that are more powerful and more comforting than spoken words.

Symbols function like *metaphors*. We learnt about metaphors at school in English class! They begin from a first meaning of something, e.g. the warmth of fire, and refer this first meaning to second meanings. So I can talk the warmth of friendship. I learnt in that English class that this poetic movement from one meaning to a second meaning is called *analogy*.

By living in and staying with "first meanings" of something I can be drawn beyond that meaning. The first meaning of fire, for example, is found by living with fire. Fire warms us, it burns rubbish, it is bright, it is forever moving, it is fascinating.

Once we have lived with something in its first meanings then it can become symbolic for us. If we don't live with something then it cannot work for us. To say "I'm as cold as ice" to a Bushman of the Kalahari desert would not communicate anything! However, having lived with fire, I can say to the same Bushman, "Our friendship warms me".

Referring to God using the symbol of fire I can speak of God

- as a purifying fire - God gets rid of the rubbish of my life.
- as the warmth of the Divine Love,
- as "lighting up my life",

and so on.

Another thing about symbols is that the same symbol has two opposite meanings. Symbols integrate opposites. Fire warms, but it also burns. Water refreshes, but it also drowns. I can touch someone with love or hit them in anger.

So, in Christian ritual symbols can signify death AND resurrection, positive and negative forces, and the need for reconciliation between such forces.

The water of baptism starts me on a journey where I am called:

- to be dead, drowned, to inappropriate ways of life; to be part of the death of Jesus.
- to be alive, to appropriate ways of life found in the community of Jesus; to be part of the resurrection of Jesus.

We "know" this symbolic presence of God in the shape of sacramental rites. This shape speaks of the role of the Word and the role of the Spirit.

In baptism, for example, God's WORD is used to give this water a certain context. We can read of the Water of the Flood, the Water flowing with the blood from Jesus' side on the Cross, and we can recall Jesus' own baptism. Yet as St. Basil says: 'if there is any grace in the water, it is not of the nature of the water, but of the presence of the Holy Spirit'. The SPIRIT moves us to be open to what this water symbolises. There is a dynamism between WORD and SPIRIT that makes this Word and Symbol a powerful moment in appreciating God's presence breaking in to our lives.

Let us open out this symbol more. Water in its first, primary, meaning cleanses us, it refreshes us, it gives life, it floods, it drowns, it washes away. The breaking of waters precedes the birth of a child. Used with the Word of God in the Ritual of Sacraments we could speak of this water being the symbolic Presence of a God whose water breaks over us

and we are reborn in Christ in 'Mother Church'. In Baptism we are called to be drowned to sin - it is a symbol of the death of Jesus. But Baptism also refreshes us, gives us life - it is a symbol of resurrection.

So it is with the symbol of Oil. Oil as a lubricant gets things moving; as an ointment, it heals; as a fire, it warms and destroys; as a lamp, it enlightens our darkness; as a liniment, it strengthens; as a cosmetic cream, it enhances and beautifies; as a moisturiser it soothes; as 15+ in summer it protects. These are its first meanings

Used in ritual, oil makes present to us, symbolically, the God who protects, strengthens, heals, soothes, enhances, beautifies, purifies, warms and enlightens us.

Hence

- in the Sacrament of Confirmation I am strengthened, enlightened to use my gifts well. In the Spirit my baptismal commitment is enhanced.
- in Anointing of the Sick I am healed of distress and even physical 'dis-ease'. The destructiveness of sickness, and even death, gives way to hope and strength in a protective, enlightening God.

A good exercise would be to think of the primary, first meanings of other symbols used and think of how they apply to the second meanings of religious ritual. What do you associate with the symbols Bread, Wine, Touch? E.g. 'touch' has embrace as one primary meaning. What are the second meanings when we use touch as a symbol?

One of the things to note is that the best symbols are universal. When we use fire, water, earth, oil, the sun, smoke, tree, wind, breath, touch we are using things that are common to all peoples, all human experience.

Many countries in our world are now made up of multicultural societies so to use such symbols is helpful. They can unite people, where-as rational thought expressed in one language can exclude some. Universal symbolic language is inclusive of all people, whatever age (even small children) or culture or language.

To sum up, as Paul Ricoeur's says 'Symbols give rise to thought', and this is the impetus for all our thinking and reflection about sacramentality:

- symbols are the 'language' of sacramental life;
- symbols point from themselves to something else;
- symbols always point from a first meaning to a second meaning - the first meaning of a symbol leads by ANALOGY to a second meaning;
- it is by living in the first meaning that we are drawn beyond it;
- the most powerful symbols are universal;
- symbols integrate opposites; dark/light, good/evil, life/death;
- symbols open up a level of reality for which non-symbol speaking, including rational thought alone, is inadequate;

- a person can participate in a symbol without understanding it;
- symbols are the language that speak to the human person's spirit of the sacred;
- symbols do not "explain" things, they open up meaning.
- in Catholic thought, symbols express the Real Presence of God.

We now use these thoughts about symbolism to speak of Jesus, the Church and the seven Sacraments.

Further Reading

Cooke, Bernard. *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of symbol in History and Theology*. Fortress Press, Minneapolis 1990. A Challenging study of the relevance of symbols of God's presence.

Power, David. *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy*. Pueblo, New York 1984. Power makes reference to Paul Ricoeur whose work is the basis for this section of the book.

3. Jesus: Sacrament of God

*After the consideration of those things
which pertain to
the mystery of the Incarnate Word,
we must consider the sacraments of the Church,
which have their efficacy from
the Incarnate Word himself.*

St. Thomas Aquinas

In these words of introduction to the Sacraments in his Summary of Theology, St. Thomas Aquinas infers that the beginning of any consideration of the Sacraments is preceded by an understanding of Jesus, the Incarnate Word.

This idea of treating Jesus as the 'first' or 'primordial' sacrament has been recovered in our time and is an essential element in our understanding of Sacraments in the life of the Church. It is essential because the sacramental system of the Church seeks to express who Jesus is for us today, to make his Word and Spirit present to us.

The symbols in the Hebrew Scriptures, the Christian Old Testament, lead us, as they led the Jewish people, to appreciate God.

In these ancient writings God is

- the 'Shepherd' who leads (Mi 7:14; Ps 23),
- a 'Rock where I can take refuge'(Ps. 18:3f; 144:1),
- the 'king' (Nm 23:21; Ps 93 and many of the Psalms),
- the 'judge of all the earth'(Ps 7:7f; Ps 9:8; Ps 96:13).
- spoken of as 'an eagle' that 'hovers over its young' (Ex 19:4; Dt 32:11),
- a Potter who shapes (Jer 18),
- the Shield that protects (Ps18:3; 144:2),
- the 'teacher from my youth'(Ps 71:17),

- the 'Word' who speaks through prophets(Is 6; Jer1; Ez 1),
 - the 'Lover' searching for the Beloved (Song of Songs, Hosea).
- Here is a wealth of imagery, of metaphor, of symbolism.

We recall a problem named in the last section when talking like this. We can refer to such language as "*just* a symbol".

Yet these symbols developed from the lived experience of people, and if you really think about it, we can only talk about God by using symbols. These symbols express the 'real presence' of God.

.As we said in the last section, the best symbols are universal, and one of the tasks facing us today is to find relevant, inclusive symbols of God for our culture and time. This quest is a main part of the renewal of Sacramental life.

With these beginning thoughts in place we want to say that Jesus is *the Symbol* of God. Jesus is THE Sacrament. He is the Sacrament of God. He points us to the reality of God. The Greek word 'icon' expresses this reality. Jesus is the Icon of God. He pictures God for us. He did this especially through his own appreciation of God as 'Abba', an intimate word for Father.

As this notion of 'Abba' developed, Jesus was able to express his own oneness with the Father. By accepting the invitation to 'Follow Me' the apostles were on their way to this appreciation of God as 'Abba', but they found this difficult. Just after Jesus stated that he was 'the Way, the Truth and the Life' that they were to follow, Philip exclaims –'Show us the Father and then we shall be satisfied' (Jn 14:8).

We can almost hear some exasperation in Jesus' voice as he says: 'Have I been with you all this time... and you still do not know me? Whoever has seen me has seen the Father'. Jesus is the Real Presence of the 'Abba'. By living with Jesus the Apostles 'knew' God. The different gospel traditions are rich with his revelations.

One of Jesus' main ways of revealing God was through *stories*. These stories are parables, a genre of story that surprises listeners, gets them in touch with their prejudices and presumptions, their biases and pre-suppositions, challenging them to see what life could be if lived with the God revealed by the values that are in the stories. For example, the Prodigal Son shows a God of mercy and compassion, a God of patient waiting and understanding, a God who invites us to enter fully into divine mercy.

At the same time *incidents* in the life of Jesus and his *actions of healing and reconciliation* help us appreciate the God he is revealing. The feeding of the five thousand reveals a God who nourishes us in the desert places of life. His handling of the situation of the woman taken in adultery points to a God of forgiveness and not of judgment and vengeance. He sits down and eats with sinners, tax collectors, prostitutes and shows a God who includes all, especially the poor and

marginalised. A very significant symbol in his life was when he washed the feet of his disciples at the Last Supper. He was not the one to lord it over people. He was the 'servant leader' who called his disciples to follow and do as he had done.

His revelation culminates in the great event of his dying and rising and points to the God of salvation. This is remembered especially in the sacrificial, fellowship meal of the Eucharist.

Jesus promised the Spirit to his disciples, a spirit who would empower them to live and act 'in memory' of him. The fulfillment of this promise is celebrated in the Pentecost event.

Everything that Jesus said and did is significant. That is why people have studied and analysed and agonised about the meaning in the stories he told and about the incidents and images of the Gospel.

The Gospel of Jesus shaped the culture and society of peoples as the Word and Spirit of God spread throughout the world. The Gospel story of Jesus was expressed in the story of communities which formed to live by the values in the Gospel in the power of his Spirit and in the next section how these communities became symbols of Jesus.

Further Reading

Georgen, Donald. *The Mission and Ministry of Jesus*. Michael Glazier, Wilmington, Delaware, 1986. This book is an easily readable study of the historical Jesus.

4. Church: Sacrament of Jesus.

Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ

St. Paul

Sting, in his song 'All this Time' from the Album *The Soul Cages*, speaks in a challenging way about the Church. He is critical of clergy 'fussing and flapping in priestly black like a murder of crows' and he prays 'Father, if Jesus exists, then how come he never lived here?'

Jesus *does* exist and the question for the church today is to make Jesus present in the church in a way that is relevant for our world.

St. Paul felt able to say: 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ'(1 Cor. 11:1). What an amazing statement! Jesus was able to say 'To have seen me is to have seen the Father'. St. Paul is in a sense saying 'To have seen me is to have seen Jesus". That is the challenge for Christians - to seek to be 'sacraments of Jesus', to be able to say 'to have seen us is to have seen Jesus'. We have to do more than fuss and flap 'in priestly black'. The Church needs to be more of a symbol that Jesus is alive, living with us.

St. Luke wrote two great books, his GOSPEL and the ACTS OF THE APOSTLES. The Gospel is the Acts of the Jesus who points us to God and life's meaning in the light of that God. The Acts of the Apostles recounts the acts of his disciples living "in memory of Jesus" pointing us to Jesus and his 'way, truth and life'. Luke's Gospel leads to Jerusalem and the command to take this Good News to 'the ends of the earth'. The Acts of the Apostles leads to Rome, the centre, 'the ends of the earth', of the then known world. It speaks of the disciples acting as Jesus.

One could speak of a third 'book'. It is the 'Acts' of our lives. The continuing work of God's saving grace is present in an on-going way through the people who live in memory of Jesus and in the power of his Spirit with a mission to move 'to the ends of the earth'.

The Church, then, is the 'Sacrament of Jesus'. Christ's faithful people point to Jesus, the Servant Leader who is the Living One who is amongst them. He is not 'just' a memory.

The early Christians were fairly small communities sharing a faith experience of this Living Servant leader. They were groups based around faith in the resurrection who initially proclaimed the Good News, the Gospel, by their lives. They were prophets in their world. They then wrote the parable stories of Jesus and the incidents in his life in the New Testament. As well as the Four Gospel accounts, his story was translated into the more abstract teaching of the letters of Paul, of Peter, of James and John and other writers of the New Testament.

The Story of Jesus came to be present also through the gathering of communities who lived by the words and actions of Jesus.

After the Resurrection and Ascension of Jesus and the Pentecost event these communities spread from Jerusalem. They were originally called 'followers of the Way' and then the name 'Christians' was used for the first time at Antioch. The missionary journeys of Paul and others led to the establishment of many communities in the first centuries after Jesus.

Later, these gradually evolved into groups or 'families' that were culturally, politically, geographically linked in a loose sort of way, and these 'families' composed rituals, liturgies to help them remember Jesus and to live in the power of his Spirit. Even though practices may have differed, and there was no real uniformity of expression, there was essential unity between the 'families'.

The rituals of these groups continued to develop and change throughout the centuries. The shape of the sacraments and the rites was influenced by the peoples that heard the Gospel and who 'translated' its meaning into their ways and customs, their cultures.

Many elements from these very cultures have been integrated into the sacramental rites making it easier for the rituals to be accepted by a particular people. Some were based on very universal symbols. The purification rites of many people used the symbol of water, the double element of light and darkness were common across many cultures, the sacred springs of ancient Mother goddesses became the sacred places of Christians gathered in 'Mother Church'.

Some would call these elements 'impurities' that crept into the rituals, yet we remember that Jesus spoke in the context of his Jewish cultural images. And really there is no other way! The use of cultural symbols is the only way to make the meaning of the Gospel story relevant for a particular people. A large number of the symbols, like light, water, touch, were transcultural and spoke of essential unity. This question of culture is very much alive today as we seek relevant expressions of 'Church' and our sacramental practice.

Tensions between the differing families of the Church are part of the history of our world. Attempts at imposed uniformity created tension and problems both for the Church as such and for sacramental practice. One effect has been that the Church as a symbol of unity was compromised and the expressions of her life in theology, including the understanding of sacraments, became a cause of dissent. The major disagreements that have split the unity of Christ's faithful and fragmented it into different, opposing 'denominations' are great tragedies and a scandal to our world.

The first major split was in the fifth century with the Council of Chalcedon (451 CE) defining the person of Jesus that was not accepted by some Eastern groups. Then in the eleventh century there was a split between the Western and Eastern political and religious worlds. This meant that the Roman (Latin) Church was split from the Greek Churches that had their birth from the ancient centers of Jerusalem, Antioch, Alexandria and Constantinople. Nevertheless the sacramental systems of East and West remained basically united. However, the Church as 'Sacrament' was disastrously split.

Then, in the sixteenth century, there was a major split in the Western, Roman Church that led to many differing western 'denomination', each with its own emphasis and expression.

Also, within this split, the sacramental system of the Roman Catholic Church was called into question by the Reformers and led to strong discussion and disagreement about the nature and number of Sacraments.

The idea of Jesus present in the Word was fundamental issue for the Reformers. They concentrated on the presence of Jesus communicated in the Word, the Catholic position emphasised the presence of Jesus communicated in Sacraments. These major insights had a great influence in defining sacraments and the Church.

There has been bitter argument and, now thankfully, dialogue between the differing positions. Uniformity is not sought, yet the *essential unity* of the community of Christ's faithful, hopefully, will become more of a reality in our times as we work for a future where the differing expressions of sacramental practice will be part of the respect flowing from that essential unity.

In our time, one of the things to be noted is that Christians are looking at the idea of Sacraments from a wider perspective. Sacramentality, broadly understood, gives a new meaning to the relationships and things of our lives.

So, whilst a lot of Western denominations of Christians rejected five of the traditional Sacraments, some still maintained a looser 'sacramentality' of their marriage rites, the ordination or commissioning of ministers, the rites of reconciliation, and healing rites.

The rest of this book will explore something of the "sacramentality" of the traditional seven sacraments, these intensive moments.

From its first days the Church has always had to deal with discord.

In these times there is a growing acknowledgement of the differing emphases. For example, the great contribution of the Reformers was to open up the richness of the Word to ordinary people. The contribution of the Roman Tradition was to keep alive the sacramental treasure of the Church. The role of the Holy Spirit is being re-discovered from its emphasis in the Orthodox tradition..

With on-going dialogue and conflict resolution the Church will be a better symbol of essential Gospel unity and Christ's faithful will live by an essential unity of sacramental expression.

Further Reading

Cooke, Bernard *Sacraments and Sacramentality*. 23rd Publications, Mystic Conn., 1983. Revised edition 1994. One of the best 'all in one book' treatments of sacramentality. Helpful discussion questions at the end of each chapter.

5. Human Personal Encounter and the Sacred: Relationship and Marriage

*The closer the embrace,
the sweeter the kiss.
Mechthild of Magdeburg.*

Friendship is a critical part of life's journey for every human person. Each of us has an essential need of significant other people in our lives. The quest for love is an on-going, maturing, growth element of each of our lives. The quest never ends.

Seeing sacramentality broadly as that which gives new meaning to our human experience we can start with human friendship as the basis of our Christian sacramental system.

The meaning that Jesus and the Church give to friendship speaks of human love as sacred, as an expression of God's love in the world. So, in committed friendship there is a new opportunity for grace, a chance to experience God.

This has not always been fully appreciated or expressed by the Church. In fact, there has been, even in our recent past, a negation of the sacredness of relationship and sexuality that has done violence to Christian friendship and love. Such attitudes even placed the married state far below that of consecrated virginity. This attitude, thankfully, is shifting as people see choice as a matter of personal vocation. Yet change is slow and many still find it difficult to integrate their love life into their spiritual journey without a great deal of inner conflict.

When young people come to formally prepare for Marriage, as a starting point, I encourage them, to speak of their experience of love. They tell me how they met, how good it is, how consuming, how vibrant. Into that experience I ask the question 'Why marry?' To many it is a surprise

and the answer proves hard to put into words adequately. However, common to all responses are two things - they are marrying for love and they want to commit themselves to one another. Love and Commitment are what it seems to be about.

In reply to my further question 'why marry in a religious ceremony?', responses arise, often after answers that refer to family expectations, that speak of it seeming to be the 'right' place and way to go about it.

Exploring this further with some Christian perspective like 'God is Love and anyone who lives in love lives in God, and God lives in that person' (1 Jn 4:16) can often bring about a revelation that really moves a young couple. They discover and name for the first time that they 'know God' *in* their love for one another, that they have an experience of the Sacred *through* their relationship. In fact, they have often sensed this dimension in their relationship, but this revelation helps them to name what they have in their love. They discover their God and their love in a new way. They name grace.

Jesus' perspective on love is summed up in his greatest commandment with its two aspects, love God and love of Neighbour, inextricably bound together. This revelation about love was so powerful for the early Christians that they concluded that the self-giving of two people manifests the relationship between Jesus and the Church (Ephesians 5). Marriage shows forth, 'sacramentalises', the relationship between humanity and God.

The Jewish Scriptures began to speak of this meaning of relationship in the great covenant agreement statement 'I will be your God, you will be my people'. There are a number of such covenants in the Old Testament between God and the People - between God and Noah, Abraham, Moses. They all express the agreement, the commitment of both parties to fidelity and love.

We read in the prophecy of Hosea that his own experience of his difficult marriage with Gomer became a sign of God's forgiveness and faithful, abiding, healing love. From Hosea's time the marriage relationship was used to help the people understand their relationship with God on a more personal level. The love relationship stood alongside the king/subject relationship and the shepherd/sheep that had been the main images used previously.

These writings and especially the great love poem, the 'Song of Songs', not only changed the people's understanding of their relationship with God but also expressed new meaning for human relationships.

This revelation comes to a fullness in Jesus. In the saving event of Jesus we see God's great act of faithful, healing love in a life given for us. Jesus is saying 'Here, this is my life for you'. This is the great Covenant sealed in blood. He symbolised this in the Eucharist - 'This is my body, given for you', 'This is my blood, given so that sins may be forgiven',

'Do this in memory of me'. The Spirit inspires us to live in memory of this love.

In this 'history of salvation' we see God communicating with the People of faith. Communication becomes the critical factor in this relationship between God and the People. At the same time, marriage and friendship are seen as revealing, communicating, God. The sacramentality of friendship and marriage is established.

Communication is indispensable in the growth and process of relationship. Such communication in Christian marriage is meant to include faith in the grace that comes through Jesus and his saving events of his life, death and resurrection.

The Marriage Rites communicates this rich tradition and meaning through various symbols.

- The people who gather are those who have been part of the love journey of the couple, those who have communicated as 'sacraments of love' to them;
- The Word of God proclaimed communicates the context of this love joined to the meaning of Jesus;
- The joining of hands communicates the 'laying on of hands', calling down the Spirit to give a new meaning to this relationship;
- The words of love and commitment that the couple speaks to one another is spoken in memory of the Jesus love;
- where a couple choose to celebrate their marriage with a Eucharist, the one Bread and the one Cup seals the ceremony in a powerful way emphasising the unity of two individuals in marriage and the unity between the couple and the community;
- Various other cultural symbols can add to this - the giving of rings, the kiss, the crowning.

The couple become a sacrament of God's love in the world and their Christian family is called to be the basic example of love, of Christian community. This is the domestic Church.

Many people in our world live in pluralistic societies with diverse people of differing cultures, races, persuasions and faiths entering into "ecumenical" and "mixed faith" marriages. This can cause tension. On the other hand, these very couples, in their struggle to design a marriage ceremony and to live with respect for each other, can be very special 'sacraments' of reconciling, healing love in our world.

Another tension today is that when we speak of 'family' as the domestic church we are in danger of narrowing down reality. The smaller nuclear family - parents and a couple of children- is the reality rather than the large family and the geographically close, extended family. And a growing number of people experience single parent family life.

We need to broaden our understanding of family if we are to say that the family is the basic unit of Christian community. Small Christian communities made up of a few families that support one another, who

pray together, who review their lives in the light of the Gospel, who live in friendship, can express the Gospel love that Jesus established with his apostles and disciples.

In all this, the basis of such a 'family' church or 'small community church', is still the love experience of the individuals involved. This includes even the experience of brokenness, and the journey of single people.

At the same time as we broaden our understanding of sacramentality and family in this chapter, we need to look to the deeper meaning of love.

A man driving along a country road one day was surprised to see a farmer ploughing his field using his Prize Bull to pull the plough. Fascinated, he stopped and asked the farmer what was wrong with his tractor. "The tractor is fine," replied the farmer, "I'm just trying to teach Ferdinand that there is more to life than romance".

Television soaps, novels, magazines, and popular music feed us full to overflowing with our diet of romantic love. The great ancient Celtic story 'Tristan and Isolde' is the beginning of such romantic stories that concentrates love on personal fulfillment. Romance has become equated with love in our times. Yet there is more to life and love, as Ferdinand learnt, than romance.

That 'more', for Christians, is especially found in the covenant love of Jesus, in his great act of love in dying and rising for the life and love of the world. He pointed us to something that would support, enhance and build on romantic love. Jesus was the sacrament of the 'God love'. The God love of Jesus is expressed in the New Testament in two Greek words - 'Philos' and 'Agape'. 'Philos' love said 'I want to be-friend you'. It calls for a lot of reconciliation and conversion. 'Agape' love that says "I am gift to you", "I am prepared to sacrifice for you, to give of my life unconditionally". *Philos* (friendship) and *agape* (sacrifice) speak of healing. Throughout his ministry Jesus used physical healing as a great sign of what the Reign of God, the Kingdom, was about. He asked us to live in memory of this great love shown in his dying and rising. He is Grace, the healing 'gift' of the Father's love in the power of the Spirit. He is intimate faithful 'friend', the God who proves 'neighbour' to us.

The Journey of meaning and discovery of God begins in this context of human love and friendship in which God is revealed as LOVE, especially in Marriage, and the Church, as such a community of love seeks to initiate others into its spirit and life.

Further Reading

Whitehead, James and Evelyn. *A Sense of Sexuality; Christian Love and Intimacy*. Doubleday, New York. 1989 Pastoral Dimensions of relationship using modern behavioural sciences.

6. The Journey - Initiation: Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist

*Launch out into the deep.
St. Luke.*

At the Easter Vigil catechumens, adults who have come to faith through the events, relationships and circumstances of their lives, stand with Christ's faithful in the light of the Easter Candle lit from the Easter fire.

- They are 'enlightened' as they listen to the History of God's saving grace present to the People in the Word of God that tells of Creation, of Abraham, our 'father in faith', of Moses and the Red Sea, of God as the Living Water, of the Resurrection of Jesus;
- they stand before the blessed water of baptism and are immersed in the mystery of the dying and rising of Jesus. They 'launch out into the deep';
- they are confirmed, anointed with the perfumed oil of Chrism that speaks of the Spirit of Jesus indwelling in them, enhancing their lives;
- they partake of the Eucharist and are in communion with their Risen Saviour and God's Easter People, themselves challenged by these new members to renew their own baptism, life in the spirit, and eucharistic life.

Their journey has come to a high point; a great moment of grace, of celebration and meaning that is sacramentalised in these Rites of Initiation, the three sacraments of Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist.

This journey has taken some time. It began remotely with their life's experiences and then more immediately with their initial conversion that led them to approach the Church community. They entered into *The Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults* (RCIA) that led them through stages and periods on their journey. Various parishioners, their sponsors, their catechist, their priest, their family walked with them on this journey.

This RCIA structure of adult initiation into the Catholic Church is based upon the Gospel. Throughout his ministry Jesus taught and formed

adults. He taught through the example of his constant prayer life with God, his words and actions, his lifestyle and by sharing his story with people around him. He spoke of the Reign of God, of a 'dreaming' that he had about life and its ultimate meaning.

Jesus did not 'demand' a following. Rather he made a strong OFFER and depended on the readiness of the people who listened, who saw him for what he was, a Servant of all, the SACRAMENT OF GOD.

Even in difficult times and under oppression, he continually touched the lives of those around him, respecting their freedom and welcoming all who choose to follow his 'way, truth and life'. His own death and resurrection became the key to the meaning of that 'ay, truth and life'

Those who responded to this OFFER experienced a conversion, a turning in their lives, that led them to become small communities of disciples that lived by faith in all that Jesus had stood for, especially his life of service. A great symbol of this service was the Washing of the Feet in Chapter 13 of John's Gospel.

The followers of Jesus, in every generation, seek to be community, to be an effective symbol of Jesus, servants living in his memory and in the power of the Spirit.

The gospel tradition of the Church lived by the community of disciples, is rich in the ways the offer to conversion is made. With selections from this tradition we will explore this richness in the rest of this section and in the next section on Eucharist.

Jesus said 'Where two or more are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them'. At Pentecost, in the Upper Room where Jesus' disciples had gathered with Mary, this community of Jesus was confirmed in the power of the Spirit with the symbols of a 'mighty wind' and 'tongues of fire'.

At the Ascension, in Matthew's Gospel, Jesus had commissioned them to 'go...and make disciples of all the nations, baptising them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit'. He encouraged them by adding: 'I am with you always to the end of the age'. (Mt. 28: 30b).

Gradually, realising that they were not to be just a Jewish group, they journeyed with the OFFER of Jesus 'to the ends of the earth' in great missionary efforts some of which are recounted in the Acts of the Apostles.

In the Gospel of John these communities were to live IN MEMORY of Jesus. They were to follow his 'Way, Truth and Life' (John 14). These 'Followers of the Way' symbolised their immersion in this Way by baptism.

As noted already, the 'followers of the Way' came to be called Christians at Antioch. Christ means the Anointed One.

At his baptism in the River Jordan Jesus experienced the Holy Spirit descending upon him in the form of a Dove and heard the words from heaven 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well pleased'. (Mk 1:11) And in the synagogue at Nazareth he explains this anointing as a prophetic unction to announce the message of Isaiah: 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me...' (Lk 4:18).

This idea of prophetic role of Jesus was completed in his priestly sacrifice on the Cross-and the understanding that he is the Messiah-King of Israel. The word 'Messiah' is a transcription of the word meaning anointed. This title, translated into Greek, *Christos*, became an integral part of the name of Jesus.

The sacramental rite of Baptism or Confirmation came to be seen as a participation of the Christian in the anointing of Jesus *the Christ* as prophet, priest and king. As in the Old Testament, this penetrating Spirit was symbolised, in the rite by the anointing with oil. Oil penetrates deeply into the body and it gives the body strength, health, joy and beauty. This anointed community was to live IN THE SPIRIT of Jesus. They symbolised this life of the spirit by the laying on of hands.

On the day of Pentecost, people were attracted by the Wind and Fire experience and Peter preached to them. 'When they heard this, they said ..., "what should we do?" Peter said, "repent, and be baptised every one of you in the name of Jesus Christ so that your sins may be forgiven; and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit..."' (Acts 2:37-38).

Three thousand were added to the band of Jesus' followers that day and we read 'they devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.' (Acts 2:42)

The elements of these mighty events were

- conversion, changing their minds about life and following this new 'Way';
- Baptism in the name of the Lord Jesus and in the name of the Trinity;
- receiving the Spirit who was to anoint, to be wind and fire;
- the breaking and sharing of the bread;
- devotion to the apostles teaching and preaching.

The early followers of Jesus were Jews who already had religious rites and structures. So the rites that developed to hold these symbolic elements had their roots in, and were associated, with Jewish practices.

These symbols became the symbols of the small communities of Jesus of the early Church that celebrated Conversion and Initiation.

Structures to hold these great symbols developed from these early years:

- Months of living faithfully with the community, turning to the 'way' of Jesus and changing from previous life patterns;
- Some form of Immersion in Water;
- Laying on of hands and the anointing with Chrism, a special perfumed oil, symbolised the life of the Spirit being with the person entering the community;
- Gathering for the 'breaking of bread', the sacred meal;
- a body of teaching, especially the Gospel story, that came to be written and followed.

The formation life of these early communities was adult oriented. Infant baptism began because parents who had undergone conversion sought to make infants and children part of the faith growth experience. The faith of the parents and the community's life nourished the constantly growing faith experience of the child as it grew into adult faith.

In the recent years the Catholic Church has restored these ancient initiation rites and attitudes in the RCIA process. In this revival, the emphasis is on the idea of Journey. Our life is a journey. It is a journey of discovery, of growth. It takes *time* and passes through different *stages*. The Christian process of initiation is a gradual formative *process* that introduces a person to the Christian life by immersing the person in the community life of the faithful. The *community itself* is the minister of the process.

With the RCIA as a model the rites and formation structures for infants, children and young people are also being reshaped. Current practices are being analysed. This exploration seeks to be true to the way that young people learn and is especially dependant on the faith community that surrounds the growing young person. The immediate family, the wider family and the family of the Church need to be symbols of Jesus, models of Christian life. Hence the formation and catechesis of adults and parents who surround children is a priority in the Church today.

Throughout our infant and young life each of the 'cradle Christians' is formed and celebrates his or her immersion into the community's life (Baptism), his or her special gifts of the Spirit that build up life (Confirmation), her or his nourishment of life (Eucharist), her or his on-going conversion to the way of Jesus (Reconciliation). As an adult, hopefully, some time in his or her journey, each comes to accept this offer of Jesus made through the Church.

Like the adults seeking initiation at the Easter Vigil, 'cradle Christians' are called each year to think about their faith life in Lent and to be reconciled again in on-going conversion.

Easter Saturday and Easter Day is a time for all to own afresh Christian life – a time for the renewal of the promises of Baptism, a rededication to life in the Spirit, a participation in the Easter Eucharist. All stand with

the newly initiated Catholics and are asked to think about their response to the offer of God in Jesus.

For many this might be routine. On the other hand it could be that, for some, this is a powerful time. It will be the first time that they have really meant what they are proclaiming in the formula response "I Do" in the renewal of Baptismal promises. It is *their* Easter in a special way. In this is a key to the question about young people and growth in faith.

As the years roll by after our infant baptism we are immersed in the sacramental life and the Gospel values of the community. Each Easter we are invited, encouraged, challenged to live by the meaning inherent in the sacraments and the Gospel. Each year we are challenged to 'own' the meaning of our initiation commitment. The Spirit moves us to a new moment of Grace when we come to this ownership.

After the Easter experience the newly initiated Catholics enter into a time of 'opening up the mysteries'. It is when they begin to discern their place in the community and use their gifts for building up of Gospel life in the Church and the World. This concludes with the celebration of Pentecost.

With them, the entire community is constantly challenged to live in the meaning of the sacramental mysteries. The one Spirit of Pentecost has gifted us in different ways. With this gift each of us is an expression, a symbol, of God's creative and redemptive spirit as we live in memory of Jesus. Our story is, ideally, constantly in communion with the Story of Jesus, the Good News. This is the way we make a difference in the world; we, Christ's Faithful, give our world and life the meaning that Jesus revealed.

The Church as such, in these years of renewal, is undergoing a conversion process. We are seeking to become more Gospel oriented. There is a constant conversion called for as we seek, sometimes painfully, to raise questions about the type of sign of God's redeeming love in Jesus we are to the world, as we become more of a community worth belonging to.

The local parish community is especially being called to such conversion as people rethink parish structures that speak of Gospel life to societies that live with indifference or aggression towards the Good News. We are a Church in the Modern World, but a Church in dialogue with secularization.

Further Reading

Duffy, Regis. *On Becoming Catholic: The Challenge of Christian Initiation*. Harper and Rowe, San Francisco, 1984. A good overview of the process and theology of the catechumenate.

7. The Journey Celebrated and Nourished - Eucharist

*On this mountain
the Lord of hosts will make for all people
a feast of rich food,
a feast of well-aged wines.*

Isaiah.

Meals, especially celebratory ones, are an important part of life. Conversations, stories and speeches over festive tables are core to our celebration of life with one another. A young couple celebrate their love with an intimate meal. Family members come together for their Christmas feast. A party group celebrates a birthday. Mourners gather at the 'wake' of a friend. Guests revel in the love of their newly married friends. Good friends gather to enjoy one another company.

This human experience of meals, a gathering for *word* and *meal*, resonates with Eucharistic meaning. There is a rich tapestry of symbolism that comes to us from many sources about this Christian sacred meal. We will explore a few of these sources.

The symbolism of Jewish celebration meals is very special to Christians. To the Jew every meal was sacred. It mattered very much with whom you ate and drank.

The banquet of the Messiah, (Hebrew for the Anointed One, *Christos* in Greek), given in Isaiah's prophecy (Is. 25) is a high point in this Jewish symbolism and speaks wonderfully of celebration. It gives a vision of what life could be if lived with, and nourished by, the Anointed One. This is the banquet of a new age.

There were three meals from Jewish heritage that give meaning to the Christian celebration of the Eucharist.

Foremost is the Passover meal (Exodus 12). It was a meal of the Lamb, the bread and other symbols of the Jewish people's time of slavery in Egypt. This meal and its story made present the time when they were led out of that slavery, through the waters of the Red Sea, to the teaching of the Sinai where the commandments of God were given. It remembered their purifying journey in the desert where God nourished them with the manna from heaven and the water from the Rock. It recalled their entry into the Promised Land. God's Spirit led them in this journey and was present with them in the Tabernacle, the Tent of Meeting. This powerful story has many associations with what Jesus said and did in the Last Supper and on Calvary.

The Jewish people also had the *Habburah* meal which was a meal of teaching between a Rabbi (Teacher) and his disciples. These were fellowship meals in which the Rabbi instructed his disciples. In Jewish thought this idea of *Habburah* meal was to be completed with the banquet with the Messiah, (cf. Is 15). Jesus often taught in the context of meals, especially in Luke's Gospel.

Yet another type of meal was the *Todah* meal which was a meal in the Temple. It consisted of a prayer of thanksgiving for some benefit, (the safe birth of my child, the gift of a good crop), and the offering of sacrifice, (e.g. a sack of wheat, a lamb), part of which was thrown on the altar of sacrifice in the Temple, part of which was shared with those gathered (especially the poor). This was a prayer of thanks and sacrifice with a communion with God and among the people.

All these rich images influence the meaning, the symbolism of the Eucharist:

- the *Passover* with its salvation and journey themes,
- the *Habburah* with its teaching fellowship, fulfilled with the Messianic banquet,
- the *Todah* with its thanksgiving for benefits and sacrifice/communion with God and one another.

So in the Eucharist we celebrate

- with praise, the saving story of Jesus who, like Moses, leads us out of the slavery of sin;
- the Lamb of God whose blood is poured out for our deliverance;
- the God who is with us on the journey, nourishing us with food and drink; - the Teacher who guides our way and who leads us to the promised land of the eternal banquet;
- our fellowship with one another in the bread broken.
- our communion sacrifice - a communion with one another and with our God whom we thank for so many benefits in life.

Another group of symbols, that build upon the Jewish meal images, come from the accounts of the Last Supper of Jesus. There are five written accounts. They are found in the four Gospels (Mk 14:22-24;

Mt 26:26-28; Lk 22: 19-20; Jn 6:51 and 13) and in Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians (1 Cor 11:24-25).

These accounts, with their varying perspectives and contexts, give us further understanding of the many meanings of the Eucharist. Mark and Matthew, Paul and Luke provide us with the account of the meal itself, the bread and wine, the words and actions of Jesus. Mark and Matthew emphasise the meaning of Eucharist as *sacrifice*, the wine poured out for the forgiveness of sin. Paul and Luke emphasise the *fellowship* perspective, the breaking of bread.

John does not give us a direct account of the taking of bread and wine. Rather he gives us a perspective on how Jesus wants to be remembered. It is like his last will and 'new' testament. Disciples are to live in memory of Jesus in the symbols of *service*, (the washing of the feet in Jn 13) and of *love* (the love command in Jn 17).

Luke really brings these two traditions together (Lk 22: 14-27) with their metaphors of sacrifice, fellowship, service and love. We need, today, to put these two traditions together in our celebrations. It is putting together 'going to church' and practical, day-to-day, love and service.

Schema

The LAST SUPPER has two Traditions

Sacramental ritual:
Two forms of meaning in

Matthew/Mark
= **sacrifice**

Paul/Luke
= **fellowship**

New Testament
meaning is in
Service
and the
love command

These traditions come together in Luke's Gospel (Lk 22:24-27)

EUCCHARISTIC CELEBRATION =

**Sacramental Memorial
Of Sacrifice and Table Friendship**

**Fulfillment of the love
command in daily life**

There is a marriage between the daily living of the 'testament' of love and service and the ritual that reminds us about such living.

There is some divorce of these two elements today

More meaning comes from the structure of the celebration. There is a movement

- from *gathering* in faith,
- to *listening and responding* to the Word of God,
- to being *nourished* in the Spirit as the Body of Christ,
- to being *sent on mission* as a community for the world.

If the Eucharist and liturgy are about 'full, conscious and active participation' (Vatican II: Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy[CSL] no. 14) then such meaning calls us to faith, to proclamation of the Word, to communion with Jesus and one another, and challenges us to be people of his mission today.

Yet another set of meanings come from the traditional doctrines of the Roman Church of Real Presence, Sacrifice and Memorial.

The Real Presence of Jesus is celebrated:

- in the gathered community of faith
- in the celebrant
- in the Word of God and, above all,
- in the blessed Eucharist.

The Risen Lord is present in the midst of his faithful. Such reality gives us enormous hope in the transforming power of the Risen Lord amongst us as we take up his mission of transformation.

Through the doctrine of sacrifice we know of the one self-offering of Jesus, now risen, truly present. Jesus who offered himself on the Cross is truly and sacramentally present. This doctrine draws us to a communion with Christ's self-offering, surely a great challenge for us in today's troubled world.

These doctrines of Real Presence and Sacrifice associate with the memorial command 'do this in memory of me'. In the Hebrew understanding keeping memorial, as well as calling to mind the event, makes it present. In the Eucharist, the event of the Last Supper, in all its power and meaning, is present and celebrated.

We could go on, and indeed, people in our time are going on, exploring the fullness of the symbolism, tradition and history of this sacrament. There is a wonderful diversity of meaning in the Eucharist that has been used by Christians to celebrate their world of love and work, life and death, struggle and prayer at the heart of the life of faith.

Eucharist, like all symbolism, is *inexhaustible in its meaning*. It is in the respect for the diversity of this symbolism that relevance and harmony will emerge.

As we know, the celebration of the Eucharist, while it is the core celebration of Christians, is also a source of scandal. What Jesus wanted as a sign of unity and harmony is a sign of division.

One of the tensions of theology has been a conflict of interpretations between groups of Christians about the Eucharist. Happily, these days, we are looking at the possibility of the unity between diverse doctrinal and ritual interpretations.

This does not mean turning our backs on the conflict of interpretations, but it does mean looking at all the tensions in context from their scriptural origins through to the difficulties at the time of the Reformation in the sixteenth century. It does mean rediscovering the language of symbol and human sciences and art that form ritual celebrations. It does mean appreciating and respecting the contributions of Orthodox, Reformation and Catholic positions. It does mean being conscious of culture so that there is a relevance in the celebration of the Eucharist. It does mean living with the fact, already expressed, that Eucharistic symbolism is *inexhaustible in its meaning*. Eucharist is not limited to one exclusive meaning.

In our times there is a convergence of Christian theology and celebration that is seeking to express a more complete picture of the Last supper's command 'do this in memory of me'. There is more respect for the meaning that arises from complimentary traditions. In dialogues between Christian churches there is growing agreement and understanding about diverse opinions so that there is hope for eucharistic unity.

As well as these theological and ecumenical considerations there is the tension of relevance of the Eucharist to society and our world. There are many criticisms about it being 'boring', about it being attended by 'hypocrites - Sunday Christians'. There is apathy, a 'so what' attitude. Its form and style, its music and gesture, are seen as antiquated. It is seen as a museum piece rather than an expression of our need for meaning. Ethnic groups around the world see it as structured on European lines and symbolism that does not take their cultural realities into consideration.

It is no good being defensive about many of these perceptions. Owning some truth in them is the very reason for the renewal. Work is being done to make new forms, new styles of celebration that speak the language of the people.

Such shifts began with the change from Latin to modern languages in the Roman Catholic Church in the sixties, and many other ecumenical and cultural initiatives.

These initiatives own that the celebration is not just 'worship for worship's sake', a liturgical concert of nostalgic past glories. It is seeking to be the 'source' and 'summit' (Vatican 11, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, no. 10) of our lives that uses the rich artistic tradition and tapestry of symbolism in a culturally relevant way. This is complex in our multicultural, pluralistic societies.

Again, the liturgy today seeks to move us from being 'Sunday Christians'. The very point of the ritual is to bring to mind, to 'remember', who we are as baptised people confirmed in the Spirit. We are in communion with the *Christos*, the Anointed One, in whom a new age is being created.

The attempts to make liturgy both reflect and address our everyday life is critical. Gospel life and spirit, celebrated in the Eucharist, permeates every aspect of our relationships with one another and our earth. It speaks into the real issues of life, our needs, our quest for justice, love and peace.

At the same time as all this is happening it needs to be said that apathy and cynicism about the meaning of the Eucharist are not creative responses. The Spirit seeks openness and challenges us all to use our gifts of intelligence to discover in this wealth of theology and in the action of eucharistic celebrations the God present and active. God, in Jesus, is breaking into our world and lives. The offer is made. Responses like openness to prayer and sacramental action can will deepen our appreciation of God.

We are at a new moment of grace in our renewal of Eucharistic life. We have explored some of the wealth and abundance of its history and tradition. As the Spirit directs us to reflect on this rich heritage, people of each culture will be led to 'do this in memory of me' with relevance and with grace, in unity and harmony with each other and our world.

Further Reading:

Hellwig, Monika. *Eucharist and Hunger for the World*. Paulist Press, New York 1978. A study of the main issues around Eucharist today.

8. The Journey and sin: Ongoing Conversion - Reconciliation

*The quality of mercy is not strained.
Shakespeare.*

Confession, Penance, Reconciliation have fallen into a bit of a 'black hole' in Catholic practice today. We have just come out of "the golden age" of frequent confession of the 1930-1960s and the pendulum seems to have swung the other way. Catholics seem to have shifted from an attitude that saw Confession to a priest as the only way of being forgiven to a wider understanding of Reconciliation. This in itself is a good thing yet it raises the raw question, 'Who needs to go to a priest for forgiveness; why go to Confession at all?'

In the year 57, St. Paul wrote to the Christians at Corinth:

...if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away: see, everything has become new! All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us. So we are ambassadors for Christ, since God is making his appeal through us; we entreat you on behalf of Christ, BE RECONCILED TO GOD. See, now is the favourable time; see, now is the day of salvation! (2 Corinthians 5:17-20, 6:2b)

To reconcile is to re-unite, to bring back to harmony, to heal division, separation, rupture. The Christian perspective seeks reconciliation with God, with one another, between nations and with our environment.

The life of Jesus was totally dedicated to RECONCILIATION; the life of Christ's faithful, the Church, is to be a symbol of this reconciliation. We are Sacraments of unity, 'Ambassadors for Christ.'

All the sacraments have this reconciliation element.

- BAPTISM initiates a person into the quest for reconciliation. We are immersed in the waters, drowned to disunity and discord, alive to harmony and oneness. We are reconciled to the 'Original' state.
- CONFIRMATION empowers us to live by and to know the strength of the Spirit of God within and opens us to know that God is really alive in us. In the Spirit we hear the Father's words 'you are mine, the beloved, my favour rests on you'. We are gifted 'children of light' who turn AWAY from darkness and serve God's saving plan with our gifts.
- EUCHARIST is the nourishment of our lives 'so that sins may be forgiven'. It is not a reward for being good. It nourishes our quest, our journey, to be perfect, 'compassionate as my heavenly Father is compassionate'.
- MARRIAGE celebrates two people constantly touching one another with the healing love of God in their lives. They seek to resolve any brokenness in relationship, so creating a life of harmony and love.
- ANOINTING OF THE SICK is about a person coming to reconciling hope in their illness so that the destructive power of their illness gives way to new hope and new possibilities even if illness and limitations remains, even if death occurs as a final reconciling healing.
- MINISTRY and ORDER seeks to be a focus of the community's quest for harmony, to be a centre for conflict resolution, to be a symbol of 'Holy Order' in our world.
- RECONCILIATION, as one of the seven sacraments, is a new moment of grace and a time of awareness about our personal and social sin, calling us to remember our Baptismal commitment, our life confirmed in the Spirit, our unity with the Eucharistic people.

And, as well as all sacraments incorporating reconciliation, the Christian tradition and teaching celebrates reconciliation in many ways, apology, prayer, penance. In all this the question about the relevance and necessity of the Sacrament of Reconciliation still remains for many. People are asking this question especially about children and Reconciliation.

The core of its relevance and celebration of the Sacrament of Reconciliation comes from listening to the Parable of the Lost Son in Luke 15. This is Jesus' story of mercy. As we reflect on Luke 15 we see that the Sacrament of Reconciliation ritualises this story. The Sacrament associates us with the story:

- We stand before God as the Son stood before his Father. We do this as 'two gathered in my name' - the penitent and priest. The priest is shepherd, director of our spiritual journey.
- We speak what we have come to know about ourselves, as the son admitted that he had 'mucked-up' (the pig sty image) his life. We speak out; we "exorcise" our sin in the language of our confession.

- We accuse ourselves as the son did – ‘I have sinned against heaven and against you’. Neither God nor the priest judge us, we judge ourselves
- We pass sentence on ourselves as the son did – ‘I am no longer worthy to be called your son’. Neither God nor the priest sentences us.
- We ask humbly to be taken back into the ‘Father's House’ as the son did. We have ‘come to our senses’ and see the sense of God's way of life shown to us in the Gospel of Jesus.
- We experience the compassion of a God who touches us with power and embraces us with energy and loving kindness as the son was embraced and rejoiced over by his understanding Father. The laying on of hands and the prayer of absolution, and the encouragement and direction that the priest offers us are images of this.
- We are challenged to enter more fully into the loving mercy of the Father as the second son was.

By giving us this parable Jesus reveals a new perspective on sin and evil - MERCY rather than JUDGEMENT, UNDERSTANDING rather than CONDEMNATION.

This story has to do with God as Trinity. The *Son* is one with the *Father* in the *Spirit* of Mercy and Love. Jesus calls us to understand the Father/Son relationship in the power of the Spirit. Live always and forever in that ‘House’ is the invitation of this classic story of Jesus.

To sin is to distance oneself from that relationship as the Prodigal son did, or, like the second son, to refuse the call to enter into the Father’s compassion and mercy. All evil is the consequence of the human person trying to come to terms with existence on a basis other than this Parent/Child relationship. The language of confession and the Sacrament of Reconciliation are symbols of the constant response to the call to live in that relationship. In this is the key to discovering how often one ought to seek the sacrament.

As always with sacraments, to see Reconciliation in all its power is to live in the realm of the symbolic and the spirit. Its simple structure gives us a chance to be aware of who we are, standing before God and ourselves and the community's life. We own who we are and seek the spirit of God to be with us, to renew us, to redirect us.

Also, to see the relevance of this Sacrament is to answer questions about its role in our lives. The emphasis has been misunderstood in the past. ‘I don't have to go to a priest to be forgiven!’ is hardly the issue. The issue is that this sacrament allows a person, within a communal setting, a CONSTANT EXPERIENCE of on-going awareness of *Conversion*, a turning of life, a changing of mind and heart.

The structure of the Rite of Reconciliation, within a wider understanding of the reconciling mission of the Church, seeks to allow us to do all this. There are three forms of the Sacrament that express both the individual

and social aspects of our conversion. The Second form that gathers us together in prayer and then allows for each person to individually approach a priest seems to best express the communal and personal nature of Reconciliation.

This communal aspect of sacramental life is especially challenging in these times as we are challenged to social as well as personal responses to the Gospel. The church is seeking to clarify its own identity in this time of history and in many cultural situations. It is clarifying its mission as it constantly converts itself and challenges each cultural system and its values to bring about the 'new creation' that is 'all God's work'.

In all these forms of the sacrament of Reconciliation

- we stand before God in hope as the priest welcomes us and encourages us;
- We examine our consciousness about our experience of God breaking in to our lives;
- We seek to accept the values of the Kingdom;
- We ask God to enter into those areas of our lives where Jesus is still not Lord;
- We ask to be welcomed again into the 'Father's House';
- We pray in sorrow and for the Spirit to be on us in a fresh way so that we are a symbol of God's compassion and mercy (cf. the second son in the Prodigal Son parable).

Schema

There are three Rites of Reconciliation

1. Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents.
2. Rite for Reconciliation of Several Penitents with Individual Confession and Absolution.
3. Rite for Reconciliation with General Confession and Absolution.

This overview of the Sacrament according to the 1973 revision gives us the personal and social dimensions of Conversions and Reconciliation.

Perhaps the best expression of these two dimensions is found in the Second form – a gathering of the *Community* where there is *Individual* Confession and Absolution.

We are still very much in the process of rediscovering the power and beauty of this sacrament.

Further Reading

Dallen, James. *The Reconciling Community: The Rite of Penance*. Pueblo, New York. 1986. The history and theology of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

9. The Journey and limitation: Healing.

He took our diseases and bore our infirmities.
Isaiah

In western culture when we greet people we enquire about their health – ‘how are you?’ Not that we really want to know. In fact, we’d rather not know!

Go to a card shop and look at the comic get well cards and you can see how our society views illness. We joke about it with cards about ‘the Epic of the Bedpan’, and the amorous adventures of patient and nurses. They associate with the story of visitors sitting around the sick person eating her chocolates, talking to one another and not with her.

We don't like facing illness. We all suffer from ‘dis-ease’ about illness. Our sick, elderly, and disabled quickly become hidden. It is hard to ‘keep in touch’ with them. We are ‘ill at ease’ in their presence. We don't know what to say.

On the other hand, our T.V. advertisements are full images of wonderful, young, healthy, slim, orthodontically perfect Venus and Adonis types. The fitness industry is well indeed as many seek to mirror these images.

Yet the experience of health is not the normal experience of the human person. Being ill or limited is a much more common human condition. Each day has its ill effects, its aches and pains, its coughs and spasms. The AIDS epidemic is forcing us to think about our perceptions of illness and our response to it.

Those living with disabilities have been trying to do this for us for years. People in wheelchairs or the home-bound are symbols for us all. They make us think, to reflect on what is true health and what it is to be truly ‘able’.

To see the sick, elderly the disabled and limited as symbols for us is where we start if we are going to have a healthy approach to illness and understand the Sacrament of Anointing.

Rather than start with our reaction to the sick person, we start rather with the sick person who can tell us so much about life and God because they are dealing with deep questions. The sick person, being drawn to deeper faith and meaning in life, draws us along on this journey.

There are many stages on this journey of illness. The journey includes the question 'Why Me?' In this question is the experience of sin. It is as though the sick person were saying 'What have I done wrong to deserve this?' and that we, who surround her, were saying, 'It seems so unfair, she is such a good person'.

In this we are in touch with evil and its power. Of course illness has nothing to do with the goodness or sinfulness of the sick person. Yet illness is wrongly perceived as some sort of punishment from God. Jesus himself faced this with the Blind Man in John's Gospel: 'Who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' (Jn 9:2) Indeed for the Jewish culture of the time of Jesus there was the perception of a strong relationship between sin and illness.

The accent for Jesus, however, was not so much on sin, but on discovering something very deep and sacred in the experience of illness. The accent is on the sick person who, through this experience, discovers the meaning of life in a new way and who discovers God in a particular way. Jesus' answer about the blind man is 'he was born blind so that God's work might be revealed in him'. (Jn 9: 3)

The sick are revealing 'God's work' to us. So their worth is not in their ability to work or bring home the pay packet, nor in their ability to play in the Tennis team on Saturday. Their worth is in their *being ill* and revealing meaning and God to us. They make us think, reflect. They find new meaning and a God who transforms the destructive power of illness and reveal that new meaning and God to us all.

We are not saying here that illness is a blessing, yet we are seeing illness or limitation as an opportunity for a new moment of grace.

St. Paul speaks of the sufferings of Jesus, the one who was both weak and strong, (2 Cor.13:4) as a constant lesson for us of the transforming power of illness and suffering; 'we suffer with him so that we may be glorified with him' (Rm. 8:17). Illness draws us into the power of the transforming Spirit.

The word 'Christ' means 'anointed'. Through laying on of hands, prayer and anointing with oil in the Sacrament of the Sick the sick person becomes one with 'the Christ', the anointed one. The sick person is a symbol of Christ and his passage through weakness and death to new life. The sick person draws meaning out of her illness. We, who surround

her, draw meaning out of our experience of her illness. We move from being 'ill at ease', 'dis-eased' and we are drawn beyond the great destructive power and meaning of sickness by our ministry to the sick person.

In Christian healing, sickness loses its destructive power, its negative hold over us. Ministry to the sick seeks to move the destructive symbol of illness to a life growth symbol. The sacrament of the sick is an invitation to transformation, a conversion. And it is not even too much to hope that physical health can be restored even in the face of great destructive odds. This is an aspect of healing that the charismatic Christian groups are asking us to emphasise more. We remember, however, that in Christian healing, death is seen as the final healing.

The Rite calls upon the Spirit to transform. In the Laying on of Hands and in the Anointing with oil a re-shaping of the meaning of illness takes place. In Christian terms this is through HOPE.

The sick person communicates to us in his or her illness and the Word speaks of God who not only creates us, but also heals and redeems. This is the 'new creation' in Christ that sees sickness, not as a punishment, but as part of our dying and rising with Christ. In contrast to questions about evil and suffering the perspective of Jesus strongly says that illness can terminate in HOPE because the sick person is a symbol who proclaims the victory of the Cross. The resurrection followed the suffering of Jesus. New possibilities follow the illness of the sick person.

This is a conquest of guilt and sin and evil. The 'Why me?' question gives way to the *mystery* of illness and solidarity with the suffering and death of Jesus given for the life of the world. This is truly the appreciation of God's presence in our life's journey.

Jesus cried on the Cross 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me'. It was in that emptiness that he discovered God when all seemed absolutely desolate. As Jesus Christ was drawn out of darkness and death to light, so too is the sick person and all of us drawn to this light. In illness we can grow closer, we become more compassionate, we grow in understanding. We grow in wholeness, in health, in holiness.

The community needs to move from un-ease, dis-ease felt in the presence of an illness to hope and new possibilities. All sick and limited, need to be included *in* their state of dis-ease in our communities. Such inclusive communities will conquer guilt, sin, evil and darkness and will be enriched by the revelation of 'God' work' given to them.

We see expressions of this inclusive type of ministry especially when anointing is celebrated communally and when Eucharist is taken directly to the sick from Sunday Eucharist.

In all this we see that Anointing is not just a private sacrament for the individual but part of 'God's work' in the world. The sick have a role in

the wider mission of the church to the world. This is the framework of Catholic teaching that respects human life in all forms, unwanted, deformed, disabled. This is the mystery of 'God's work'. We appreciate God in such a mystery.

Further Reading

Poschmann, Bernhard. *Penance and the Anointing of the Sick*. Herder and Herder, New York, 1964. A classic that pertains to both Reconciliation and Anointing.

10. The Journey and Service: Ministry and Holy Orders – the baptised and ordained.

*Here am I among you as one who serves
Jesus.*

St. Thomas Aquinas requested in his prologue to *On the Sacraments* that people not separate out specific issues in their thinking about sacraments. In fact commentators did just this. The model of unity that Thomas set up was shattered.

This sort of thing happened a lot over the centuries and one of the effects was that there was a separating of things that were closely related. This has been especially so about ministry throughout the two thousand years of history of ministry since Jesus asked his disciples to 'follow me', 'teach all nations'.

This separating out meant a narrowing down of the idea of priesthood in the Middle Ages where the Sacrament of Holy Orders was mainly seen in terms of the priesthood (priests, not Bishops and Deacons) and the offering of Eucharistic sacrifice. Ministry was narrowed down to clergy and religious.

Vatican 11 has broadened Holy Orders to re-establish the three fold structure of ordination, - Bishop, Priest, Deacon. It also widened the idea of ordination by saying that ordination to each of these three ministries was ordination to the threefold ministry of Word, sacrament and pastoral care. This was a return to the practice of early centuries. The renewal is now speaking of the ordained priest as the "presbyter".

In these times we also see an explosion of other ministries. Pope Paul VI in an exhortation on Evangelisation in the Modern World (*Evangelii Nuntiandi* 1975) gives a broad vision of lay ministries based on the

movement towards greater community life. This is especially evident where the Church seeks to form basic or small Christian communities.

As well as Pastoral Associates - both religious and lay, women and men, serving communities alongside clergy - lay ministries of the Word and Eucharist abound as *official* ministries. Yet there are other ministries that serve youth, the home bound and people in Hospitals, Nursing Homes. There are Members of Parish Councils, Catechists, Musicians, Welfare Workers, Administrators, Financiers, Preparers of Liturgy, Marriage Counselors, Members of Catechumate and Sacrament Preparation groups and many others. All this is a part of a renewal process that has not reached its final goal of the full expression of service as commanded by the Gospel.

Jesus' ministry was a ministry of service. He called twelve apostles to form a small group around him as he followed his vocation, a vocation that came to him in his Baptism in the Jordan by John and in his prayer in the desert that followed. He was tempted not to be true to that vocation yet he overcame the temptations and journeyed through the countryside as a travelling preacher speaking of the good news of salvation, the Kingdom, the Reign of God.

He summed up his mission in the synagogue at Nazareth when he quoted the prophet Isaiah:

*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to captive
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.* (Lk 4: 18-19)

After the great events of his Passion, Death and Resurrection, and the events of Pentecost, communities gradually structured themselves according to the gifts of the people involved, gifts of service for the building up of the Body of Christ. Paul wrote a lot about these in his letters. Such ministry was wide-ranging and came from the Spirit. It was linked to being a member of the community.

These ideas have been recovered in our time as we speak of the church as the people of God, Christ's faithful, sharing in the three fold office of Jesus as priest, prophet and king.

One of the key developments about ministry from this recovery is the large participation of the faithful in ministry. This flows from an understanding of the *priesthood of all believers*.

This is the Priesthood that we were all immersed in through Baptism. The ordained priesthood is seen as one aspect, albeit an important one, of this common priesthood. Ordained priesthood is celebrated in the Sacrament of Holy Orders.

This concept of the *priesthood of all believers* entails an understanding of Ministry as something which is not exclusive to bishops, priests and deacons. We are all called to ministry. It gives us all the role of bringing the Gospel of Jesus to our world, evangelising, and being servants of that Good News. This is a leadership role that each person in the Body of Christ has to fulfill. This has affected our ideas about the role and exercise of the ordained ministry.

With the renewed emphasis on the ministry of the baptised, the role of the ordained priest is shifting. The collaborative nature of ministry leads to a real sharing in the mission and life of a community. The acknowledgment of many gifts in various people, men and women, young and old, and the shared decision making processes, become part of this transformation.

In this broader understanding of Ministry, as the vocation of all adult Christians, we are still left with the consideration of the Ordained Ministry and its role and significance in the ministering Community. This consideration is something that is being done in dialogue with other Christians and, hopefully, will help bring about reconciliation and unity.

One way into this is to distinguish between the gifts of the various *ministries* that we have spoken of and the *order* with which the community structures itself.

The ordained bishop, priest or deacon is one of the baptised that is chosen at the Ordination ceremony and acclaimed by the gathered people. The central ritual action of Ordination is the laying on of hands, with the prayer of blessing, invoking the Holy Spirit to descend. The ordained minister is to be a sign of unity, a symbol of 'order', of the communion of the people. The presbyter is an agent and witness to the God whose presence is appreciated in everyday experience in the world.

He (or in some Churches, in some cases, she) is ordained to preach, to care pastorally for the community and to focus its sacramental life. Sunday Eucharist is the particular occasion when the presbyter symbolically focuses and orders that communal life. The Eucharist is the place where all the gifts and ministries of the local Church community converge. The discerning and empowering Spirit is present through Word and Sacrament for all as the 'source and summit' of the community's life and mission.

The bishop serves the communion of all these communities in his Diocese. His preaching and leadership serves to connect the many diverse groups of people in Gospel unity. Such connection and diocesan unity is an expression of the fullness of the Church.

The Bishop also links the local church with the universal church. We see the Bishops as a 'college' that establishes unity. For the Roman tradition this unity is focused in the Papacy. National Conference of Bishops and other national and international gatherings, especially Synods, serve this unity and connectedness.

One of the difficulties that remain is the distinction and separation of the ordained and the baptised faithful. The restoration of permanent deacons and the exploration of the many diverse lay ministries can help relieve this tension. Another significant contribution is team approach to ministry that seeks the collaboration of people - lay, religious and clergy, men and women.

By keeping their secular jobs and by exercising liturgical and pastoral functions lay ministers and permanent deacons can especially express the link between life and liturgy, between the ordained and the baptised.

Our ideas and exercise of Ministry and the Sacrament of Holy Orders are still developing in these times. The core idea is that about many, diverse ministries. There is a long way to go.

Other challenging and key questions like the developing role of women, the recognition of ministries between churches and other religions, and the vocation crisis are being addressed as we seek in Holy Orders and Ministry to answer the call to the mission of Jesus, 'Follow me' and 'Preach the gospel to all'.

Further Reading

Cooke, Bernhard. *Ministry to Word and Sacraments: History and Theology*. Fortress Press, Philadelphia, 1978. A study of the development of ministry and holy orders from gospel times to the present.

11. The Journey completed: Dying, Death and Funeral Rites.

In my end is my beginning
T.S. Eliot

The one thing we all have in common about the journey of our lives is death. Happy thought! It is really if we put death in the context of Eliot's words and of Meister Eckhart's statement 'One must be dead to see God.'

Jesus' life was a journey. He set his sights on Jerusalem where he was to give his life in death. In his journey there is a great revelation. His perspective on death sought to turn death's destructiveness to hope. He lives beyond death. He rose from the dead.

The Christian tradition seeks to speak of this hope by surrounding death with many elements of sacramental life. The Rites of dying remind a person of the promise of their BAPTISM. The promise of everlasting life was given in their rebirth in Christ.

We are reminded of the way that Jesus himself turned his desolate cry 'My God, My God, why have you abandoned me!' into 'Father, into your hands I commend my Spirit' and so came to know that eternal spirit of life that they celebrated in CONFIRMATION.

We are given the Bread of Eternal Life, the 'living bread come down from heaven', 'anyone who eats this bread will LIVE FOREVER'. We are on a final journey and, as with the people in the desert in Moses' time, we are given the Bread from heaven, the Manna, to help us on our journey through the desert of death to the Promised Land. This is bread for the way - VIATICUM (Literally 'on the way with you'). This is *the* Sacrament of the dying.

The dying person celebrates the ANOINTING OF THE SICK. In earlier times Anointing of the Sick was called 'Extreme Unction' and came to be seen as the sacrament of dying and, often, of death. We are recovering

the idea of the 'bread for the Journey' as the last sacrament. The oil, blessed the previous Easter, brings hope in the final healing of death. The laying on of hands speaks of solidarity with the dying person and the power of the Spirit that raises the dead to eternal life. Again we are faced with the thinking about this sacrament as the last sacrament, 'Extreme Unction'. This is giving way to its new significance. There is still a residue of this thinking around, however, so that people are reluctant to 'call the priest' to celebrate this sacrament as it is seen as a symbol of imminent death.

As we have said in unit 9, in the experience of illness a person has an experience of sin. The dying celebrate RECONCILIATION to be at peace within themselves so that they realise their dying has nothing to do with their personal sin but it is, rather, a mystery to be entered into with hope. In dying, a person is linked with the suffering of Jesus, the innocent one, who suffered and died for the life of the world.

MARRIAGE and friendships are obviously associated with dying. For the dying person to 'let go' of their spouse, family and friends calls for a vision of love that sees eternal love as that which is the promise and fulfillment of the relationships of this present physical realm of life. For the family and friends to let go physically, to give 'permission' to die, and to begin to enter into a new spiritual relationship with the dying person, calls for an heroic spirit, a deep hope and a love that transcends death. The words of the Song of Songs come to mind in this context :

*Set me as a seal upon your heart
as a seal upon your arm;
for love is strong as death,
Its flashes are flashes of fire....
passion fierce as the grave.
Love can no flood quench,
no torrents drown. (Song of Songs 8:6-7)*

The family and friends of the dying person are drawn into all these meanings as they begin their grieving in the days, weeks and months of the final illness.

The violence of sudden death, like a car accident, is that people have not had a chance to experience this process. They have no time and are shocked into a situation that needs great, sudden, adjustment. They are helped by the Funeral rites that speak of them accompanying their deceased on the final journey. The Funeral Rites themselves are a journey, a process that expresses the stages of grief.

The 1989 *Order of Christian Funerals* speaks especially to the family of the deceased. Dying and Death and the Rites of Christian Burial are surrounded by symbols that express and sum up the sacramental life.

During the FUNERAL RITES the grieving,

- are led to hope in the promise of BAPTISM as we sprinkle the body and the coffin with Water and accompany the body on its last journey;

- recall the life of the eternal Spirit celebrated in CONFIRMATION as they remember the words of the Father 'you are mine, the beloved, my favour rests on you';
- are united with the deceased by being one in the ONE BODY OF EUCHARISTIC LIFE, the BREAD OF ETERNAL LIFE;
- speak of their relationship to the deceased as family members or friends give eulogies at the rites and all are invited into NEW RELATIONSHIP OF LOVE in the SPIRIT - a relationship expressed in our time of human love (and MARRIAGE) with the deceased;
- live as MINISTERS of the Good News as they minister consolation and hope to one another until, in their turn, join this great band of the Servants of God. The ORDAINED focus this journey for them;
- are healed of despair and loss by the Spirit of Jesus and his Word of Life that ANOINTS US.

The funeral rites have three main moments - VIGIL, THE FUNERAL MASS/LITURGY, THE COMMITTAL. These three moments have an integrity and 'passage' that speak to our understanding of the grief process and our need to journey with one another and with the deceased in these last moments. One consequence of the pressures modern life is that we can telescope these three rites into one. The three rites seek to help people face and confront the grief as a process. The one rite can let people resist and escape this process.

The three rites in progression give us a theology and psychology to prepare for and to celebrate the death of a person.

- The VIGIL and RELATED RITES AND PRAYERS give us the opportunity to speak with personal and intimate expressions of grief. In our multicultural societies cultural elements are especially relevant in these ceremonies. The story of the person's life is told.
- The FUNERAL MASS or LITURGY asks us to bring that personal, intimate grief to the story of Jesus, especially his dying and rising to new life, expressed in Word and Sacrament. The story and life of the deceased is taken up into this great Story, the Good News.
- the COMMITTAL speaks of an end of the old relationship and the creation of a new relationship based upon prayerful remembrance, gratitude and hope of resurrection and reunion.

So the Journey ends yet as T. S. Eliot says "in my end is my beginning". What we have known through God-given symbols in our prayer and Sacramental life, we know 'face to face' in eternity. We come to completeness in our relationships in the eternal Love that is God. We are drawn into a completed creation that includes our bodily resurrection.

Our journey is complete.

Conclusion:

Dynamic Sacramental Life

Vincent Van Gogh created a painting in 1889 entitled 'Starry Night, Saint Rémy. It has electrifying energy expressing his turbulent, tormented personality. It is full of creative life and the understanding of the relationship between the world we know on earth and the vast expanses of the universe. The central village church of Saint Rémy and the lights in the village cottages link the earth with the immensity of the starry heavens. All are part of the same, immense, harmonious creation.

For Christians, what happened on the first Easter Sunday after the torment of Good Friday validated all that had happened in Jesus' life up until that Good Friday afternoon. That turbulent afternoon gives way to a creative energy that recreates human life. This is the day of a new era when human life intersects with the immense mystery of divine life known and celebrated in the person of Jesus.

Full creative, harmonious life is to live in the image of that life of Jesus, in the spirit of all his words and action that led up to that first Good Friday.

The Church is the first fruit of the Resurrection., It is the light in the darkness, like the stars and the cottage lights speaking into the darkness of Saint Rémy. Its community life remembers Jesus and enables it to live as a sacrament of his creative life. This sacramentality of the Church developed into seven intensive moments that enable and inspire us to function as the community of Jesus in our everyday life in the world.

The key to dynamism in our Church life and in sacramental celebration is this link with life and creation. If this link with life is not there we have mere rituals, we have a God who is up there somewhere, a church that is beyond the needs and dilemmas of life on this planet. Real life is our agenda when talking of sacramental dynamism. Sacraments are structures of grace that help us speak of 'life in all its fullness' in our world. They help us tap into our potential.

The sacraments involve us in an existence shaped by symbolic activity. They tell us that we are more than just a group of people. We are people who identify with the persona and mission of Jesus. We are a people, not closed in on ourselves, but ministering Jesus' saving, expansive grace. We are people with a mission to bring in the Reign of God.

Sacraments invite us to consider what life could be if we allowed their meaning to penetrate all the areas of our life. What could life be and mean if we were symbols of Jesus in our town, our suburb? To make this real we must continually look to what Jesus did and said. That is why Sunday is an agenda item for Christians. It is the day of resurrection, a day to appreciate God's presence, to remember who we are in this new era.

The ultimate aim of the Church as sacrament is that we recognize and appreciate God in all creation and in each person; to identify even, and especially, the most marginalized as the beloved of God. The ultimate aim of any sacramental celebrations is the appreciation of the God of Jesus with our community speaking to all people at these intensive moments of birth, growth, relationship, crisis, illness, dying, death. To achieve these ultimate aims is the goal of the renewal of sacramental theology.

Rites can appear meaningless. They can appear to many as a bit of medieval piety that helps with the 'big times' like births, deaths and marriages, but sacraments are not always seen as giving dynamic energy to everyday life. In fact, it can be quite the opposite, with 'irrelevant' and 'boring' being the words used to describe them.

If, on the other hand, our rituals become celebrations of the real life of the community, then when we can express in ways relevant to our lifestyle, the meaning of these intense moments, then we will know and appreciate the God who is with us on our journey.

Some are worried by this renewal and speak as though sacramental practice is something that must remain set in the expressions and rituals of the past. Yet, the use Van Gogh's "Starry Night" again, we remember that once there was the idea that the world of creation was complete and there was nothing new. Yet we know now that new stars continue to be. The work of creation goes on. So, too, the Church and all Christians are in a continual process of transformation. We are all part of creation. This is a process of the enlightening Holy Spirit. Enabled by that Spirit, may we appreciate our God, not in dogmatic statements and 'rituals', but in discovering celebrations that express life's meaning in Jesus.

The journey continues...