

Appendix D

Church as Sacrament

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Introduction

It is a joy and a privilege to be here to share with you some ideas on the notion of Church as sacrament from my own Roman Catholic tradition. It is topic of great interest in my own research and in my teaching at Fordham University. Therefore, I look forward to a stimulating exchange of ideas regarding this model for describing the Church.

The simple phrase “church as sacrament” is, in reality, a theological mouthful, so to speak. It involves theological assumptions and a particular way of interpreting the Scriptures and the Christian tradition. In order to make sense of this model for understanding church, I would like to begin with a brief consideration of the notion of “sacramentality.”

Sacramentality

The basis for understanding “sacrament” is the broader and perhaps more illusive notion of “sacramentality.” Simply stated, sacramentality can be described as having one’s eyes and ears attuned to the intimations of a benevolent God inviting us into a transforming relationship. [By “us” I mean every human person.] Sacramentality requires an openness of the imagination to being surprised by God’s presence in the mundane experiences of everyday life. In this way, ordinary created realities serve as symbols or windows into the divine. A sacra-

mental perspective enables us to view the world as the locus where God reveals God-self to us and where we respond to that revelation. It is difficult to perceived the presence and action of God in human life—and even more in the rituals or in the Church—without this ability to see the fundamental structures of sacramentality within ordinary human existence.

Sacramentality is expressed in the New Testament with the Greek word *mysterion*, meaning “hidden” or “secret.” St. Paul uses the word to speak about the hidden wisdom of God revealed through Christ’s death and resurrection (1 Cor 2:7). The early Christian Church used *mysterion* to speak about a variety of rites, symbols, liturgical objects, blessings, and celebrations. But by the Middle Ages, the Latin translation for *mysterion* was *sacramentum* and this term was used to refer only to the official sacramental rites of the Church.¹

Sacramentality is a particular way of looking at the world and at life. Because of that, it provides a framework not only for the way we live in the world and with each other, but also for the way we understand the mystery of the church and its sacred rituals.² A sacramental imagination involves having a profound awareness that the invisible divine presence is disclosed through visible created realities. In other words, it takes seriously those everyday experiences the church appropriates to celebrate its life in God through liturgy or worship.³ The sacramental world view perceives the sacred manifested in the secular; God is perceived as present and active within the world.

When we speak of sacramentality, however, we cannot limit the notion to an experience of God’s presence. No matter how much the experience of God’s presence may be mediated through the mediation of symbolic activity, no revelation of God can ever be complete on this side of the grave. So there is, alongside the experience of God’s presence, a corresponding experience of God’s absence—in our personal lives, in the church, and in the world. This experience of the hiddenness of God is also a dimension of sacramentality. The more we discover the presence of God in the here and now, the more our desire for God results in a yearning for the fullness of God’s presence, a fullness that can only be attained in eternity.⁴ This is part of the eschatological dimension of sacramentality. In other words, while God’s creation offers glimpses of God’s loving presence to those who have the eyes to see, this experience is balanced by a longing for what can only be realized when God is encountered face to face. But the experience of God’s absence is nevertheless a positive thing. It serves as a promise that what is glimpsed but dimly in the present time is but a shadow of what will be revealed to us when the need for sacraments shall cease.⁵

Definitions

Let us then hold on to this general notion of sacramentality as we consider the notion of Church as sacrament. To make clear the perspective from which I am speaking, I would like to offer some brief definitions and/or descriptions of church and sacrament as I understand them within my own Roman Catholic tradition. First then, let’s consider sacrament.

Sacrament

The traditional definition of sacrament in Catholic theology is derived from Augustine’s understanding of sacrament as an outward sign of an invisible reality. The outward sign or symbol bears witness to the inner reality of grace. But when Christian churches speak of sacraments, they generally mean either the two or seven special events of grace officially recognized as “sacraments.” This has not always been the case. In the early Church, the concept of sacrament was broader, reflecting a keen awareness of the sacramentality of human experience. The number of sacraments was more fluid. Augustine’s definition of sacrament as a sacred sign represents the Patristic viewpoint that understood countless objects and actions as “sacraments.”⁶

So the traditional definition of sacrament sees it first of all as a sign of grace. As Paul Tillich has pointed out, a sign can merely point to something that is absent or point to something without participating in the reality to which it points. But a sacrament is a symbol or full sign of something that is really present because the symbol participates in the reality to which it points. It is a visible sign of an invisible grace.

Furthermore, the Christian tradition has never understood the sacraments to be merely individual transactions. Nobody baptizes herself. Rather, sacraments take place in an interactive dynamic that permits people together to achieve a spiritual breakthrough that they could not achieve alone. Therefore we can say that a sacrament is a socially constituted or communal symbol of the presence of grace coming to fulfillment.⁷ Such an understanding naturally leads to a consideration of the notion of both Jesus Christ and the Church as sacrament.

Twentieth Century Theological Perspectives

Jesus Christ as Primordial Sacrament

As Christians, we share the belief that the Risen Lord is present in his Church. Twentieth century theologians, particularly Henri de Lubac, Karl Rahner, Edward Schillebeeckx, and Louis-Marie Chauvet, have contributed to an understanding of Church as the primary location of Christ’s presence in the world. This is the basis for speaking of the Church as sacrament. Their writings include the notion of Jesus Christ as primordial sacrament and the Church, therefore, as foundational sacrament.

Henri de Lubac argued that the divine and the human in the church can never be dissociated. An excessively spiritual and individualistic view of the life of grace, he cautioned, leads to a merely secular and sociological understanding of the Church as institution. The notion of sacrament, he suggests, harmoniously combines both aspects.⁸

De Lubac maintains:

If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ; she represents him, in the full and ancient meaning of the term, she really makes him present. She not only carries on his work, but she is his very continuation, in

a sense far more real than that in which it can be said that any human institution is its founder's continuation.⁹

Building on the work of de Lubac, Karl Rahner constructs his theology of church and sacraments on a similarly strong Christological foundation. He begins by describing Christ as "the historically real and actual presence of the eschatologically victorious mercy of God."¹⁰ In other words, in the Word of God, that is, in Jesus Christ, God's last word is uttered into the visible public history of humankind. Jesus is this word of grace, reconciliation, and eternal life. No longer does God's grace come down from on high, from an absolutely transcendent God. Instead, this grace is permanently in the world in tangible historical form, established in the flesh of Christ as a part of the world, of humanity, and of its history.¹¹

Edward Schillebeeckx presents this same idea in a similar way, referring to Christ as primordial sacrament. He points out:

The dogmatic definition of Chalcedon, according to which Christ is "one person in two natures," implies that one and the same person, the Son of God, also took on a visible human form. Even in his humanity, Christ is the Son of God. The second person of the most holy Trinity is personally man; and this man is personally God. Therefore Christ is God in a human way, and man in a divine way.¹²

This line of reasoning is the foundation for Schillebeeckx's understanding of Jesus as sacrament: the humanity of Jesus is sacrament of the Divine Logos. He explains it this way:

Because the saving acts of the man Jesus are performed by a diving person, they have a divine power to save, but because this divine power to save appears to us in visible form, the saving activity of Jesus is *sacramental*. For a sacrament is a divine bestowal of salvation in an outwardly perceptible form which make the bestowal manifest; a bestowal of salvation in historical visibility. . . . The man Jesus, as the personal visible realization of the divine grace of redemption, is the sacrament, the primordial sacrament, because this man, the Son of God himself, is intended by the Father to be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption.¹³

By "actuality of redemption," Schillebeeckx means God's redemptive love for all of humanity. But after the resurrection and ascension, Jesus is no longer visible or perceptible in his bodily form. It is at this point that the Church begins to function as sacrament or symbol of God's redemptive love for all of humanity.

Viewed from this perspective, the Church becomes the continuation and perpetual presence of the task and function of Christ—that is the historical and human Jesus Christ—in the economy of salvation.¹⁴ Rahner describes the Church as Christ's presence in the world when he explains:

The Church is the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace, which Christ is in the world, effecting what is uttered by uttering it in sign. By the very fact of being in that way the enduring presence of Christ in the world, the Church is truly the fundamental sacrament, the well-spring of the sacraments in the strict sense.¹⁵

In this citation Rahner provides a convincing argument for describing the Church as the primordial sacrament, that is, as *Ursakrament*. Christ's presence as God's mercy and grace is found in all the other sacraments because of this presence *first* in the Church.

In the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet, the Holy Spirit is understood to be the agent of God's embodiment. This embodiment involves the threefold body of Christ: the historical Jesus, the eucharistic Lord, and the ecclesial body of Christ, that is, the Church.¹⁶ The Spirit's role is "to write the very difference of God in the body of humanity, and first of all in the body of the church, which was its first visible work after the resurrection. . . ."¹⁷ In fact, it is only possible for humanity to become the sacramental locus of God's embodiment through the power of the Spirit. Chauvet explains:

This sacramental locus where in some way the risen One withdraws through the Spirit in order to be "rising," that is, to raise for himself a body of new humanity, is the church, "body of Christ" in the process of growth "to the measure of the full stature of Christ" (Eph 4:13). In its historical visibility, the church is the promise and pledge of the transfiguration to which humankind and, in connection with it, the whole cosmos are called (Rom 8 and theme of "new heaven and new earth").¹⁸

However, Chauvet leaves no doubt that this Church, even as the embodiment of Christ, is an imperfect body straining to grow into the fullness of Christ. Nevertheless, the scandal [perhaps even more surprising than the scandal of the cross] is that the weak and sinful Church is the body that God has chosen to continue his presence in the world.

Church

The English word "church" (and its equivalents in the other Germanic languages) derives from the Greek word *kuriakos* which means "belonging to the Lord." It was probably a shorthand version of *kuriakon doma* or *kuriakos domos* which means "the Lord's house." In its early usage, the word referred to the building in which Christians met for worship. However, the word *kuriakos* was always used to translate the Greek word *ekklesia* in versions of the scriptures. And the first meaning for *ekklesia* was not a building, but an official assembly of the people. The Greek word *ekklesia* is derived from the verb *ekkaleo* which means "to summon" or "to call out." Hence, the English word "convocation."¹⁹

The word "assembly" has roots in the ancient worlds of both Israel and Greece. Its theological usage can be traced to the Hebrew Scriptures where the term *qahal* is translated, like the Greek *ekklesia*, as a summons to an assembly or the act of assembling. More specifically, this assembly of persons was gathered by the Lord in order to live in his presence.²⁰ This sense of the assembly of Israel convoked by God and expressed by the word *qahal*, appears in Deuteronomy 5:19, 23:2-9, 1 Chronicles 28:8, Numbers 16:3, 20:4, and Micah 2:5. These passages focus on the divine initiative of the call and how that initiative constitutes the assembly. They also portray the divine call as the source of the people's unity.²¹

The assembly, and in particular the worshiping assembly, is key to understanding the Church as sacrament or as the locus of the presence of Christ. In fact, it is the key tenet of the sacramental theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet. Indeed, Chauvet asserts that it is impossible to have church without a worshiping assembly. Referring to the etymology of the word “assembly,” Chauvet insists that the gathering, called or convoked by God or Christ, is *the* major characteristic of Christians. In other words, Christians are a people who gather as an assembly of brothers and sisters in the name and in memory of the Lord. Chauvet calls such an assembly the “fundamental sacrament” of the risen Christ.²²

This church or assembly of people called by God has become, throughout history a visible and social presence in the world to which it has been missioned by Christ. As an organized people of God, it has evolved through many institutional forms, and none of them—including the excessively centralized papacy of the Roman church of the present time—may be regarded as definitive. In this regard, as institution, the church does not differ essentially from other institutional structures of nations or states. What does distinguish the church from other empirical societies (at least in the estimation of the Roman Catholic Church) is that it is also a mystery or sacrament. Such a designation points to its unique relationship with God and also a unique relationship with the world that God created.²³

Edmund Hill explains it this way:

As the Church, the fulfillment of Israel, the people God has taken for himself from all nations (Acts 15:14), it enjoys a quasi-divine filial relationship with the Father by being identified with his Son, by being the body of Christ endowed with the Spirit of the Father and the Son. Thus the mystery of the church is inseparably linked with the mystery of the Trinity, and indeed is the concrete, visible effect of the revelation of the supreme divine mystery.

This derivation of the church from the revelation of the mystery of the Trinity through the divine missions of the Son and the Holy Spirit means that the mission of the church is an element in its aspect of mystery, and derives from the mission of the Son and of the Spirit.²⁴

Lumen Gentium, the Second Vatican Council’s *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church*, says this about the mystery of the church in its opening paragraph: . . . the church, in Christ, is a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race . . . (art. 1) We understand, of course, that this communion with God and unity of the human race will only be perfectly realized when Christ comes again. Therefore, both the nature and mission of the church have an essentially eschatological dimension. Like all the sacraments, the church has a future reference to eternal glory and a past reference to the saving paschal events of Christ’s death, resurrection, and Pentecostal gift of the Spirit. Its mission to proclaim the good news of the kingdom must be understood as preparing humankind for its ultimate destiny and leading it toward that destiny.²⁵

This way of describing the church as mystery and sacrament is closely related to another description of the church to which *Lumen Gentium* devotes an entire chapter. The title, “people of God,” can be traced not only to the Hebrew

Scriptures, but also to the New Testament. The early Church appropriated this image as is evident in Peter’s words: “You, however, are a ‘chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people he claims for his own to proclaim the glorious works’ of the One who called you from darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were no people, but now you are God’s people. . .” (1 Peter 2:9-10).²⁶ Richard McBrien connects this people of God image to the Body of Christ image when he explains that

If the People-of-God image underlines the Church’s intimate connection with Israel and with God’s call to a covenant relationship, the Body-of-Christ image underlines the Church’s intimate connection with Jesus Christ and with God’s call to a communal relationship, one with another in Christ. . . The Church of the New Testament is the People of God, but a people newly constituted in Christ and in relation to Christ. . . In principle, both images are rooted in the Old Testament idea of corporate personality.²⁷

As Kenan B. Osborne has pointed out, “in the documents of the Second Vatican Council, the word “church” has a multivalent reference, even though Roman Catholic Church is the basic referent. These many references complicate the hermeneutical import of the phrase ‘the church as a foundational sacrament.’”²⁸ Even though there is some ambiguity or circumspection in the passages in the Vatican II documents that speak of the church as a foundational sacrament, it is clear that when the bishops discussed the mystery and essence of the church, they wanted to indicate that by its very nature, the church is sacramental.²⁹

But recall that when we were speaking of the nature of sacramentality, we spoke of both presence and absence. The Church is a “pilgrim” church, as *Lumen Gentium* describes it in chapter seven. From a theological standpoint, a pilgrim church can be sacrament only in an incomplete way. If, however, the pilgrim church possesses its sacramental character only partly and in a historical way, then the church can manifest its sacramental nature only incrementally or imperfectly. Even with the incarnation and the paschal mystery of Christ’s life, death, and resurrection, there remains an incompleteness to the pilgrim church so that, with its ecclesial divisions, the elements of both holiness and truth are scattered or diminished. In this way, the disunity of the church affects sacramentality so that one must consider whether there is a disunity in the very sacramentality of the church itself, a disunity not only of individual Christians, but of corporate groups of Christians as well.³⁰

Implications or Significance of Understanding Church as Sacrament

The church participates in the mystery of God. Christ who acts through the church, gesturing forth the love, mercy, and forgiveness of the Father, through weak and sinful humanity who live their lives “in the Holy Spirit.” In his farewell discourse, as recorded in the Gospel according to John, Jesus prays:

I ask not only on behalf of these, but also on behalf of those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one. As you, Father, are in me, and I am in you, may they also be in us, so that the world may believe that you have sent me. The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me (Jn. 17:20-23).

Christ understands this unity for which he prays to be a sign to the world of Christ's mission and the love of the Father for all humankind. In other words, we as church become that sign or sacrament of the presence and love of God when we strive to be one in Christ and with each other.

Perhaps that sign becomes more clear when we gather for worship, "for where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them" (Matt. 18:20). This presence of Christ when we gather for worship is an anticipatory presence that foreshadows the universal transformation of all humankind into Christ. That, after all, is the purpose of sacraments. But we also need to keep in mind, that we are not called to be the sacrament of Christ or the Body of Christ, so that we can glory in God's election of us as his dwelling place. Rather, our call to unity is meant to be a witness to the unity and love of God that is being poured out for the life of the entire world.

In this way, the Church's vocation to be sacrament of the presence of Christ in the world provides the Church with a strong sense of mission. As God is a God "for us," as Christ was a person "for others," so too the Church is committed to "being for others." We do this, always, in the name of the Lord, whose coming again we long for in joyful hope.

Notes

1. Thomas P. Rausch, *Catholicism at the Dawn of the Third Millennium* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 81.

2. Judith M. Kubicki, *The Presence of Christ in the Gathered Assembly* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 16.

3. Kevin Irwin, "A Sacramental World—Sacramentality as the Primary Language of Sacraments," *Worship* 76 (2002): 197-199. See also Rausch, *Catholicism*, 80.

4. *Ibid.*, 203.

5. This sentiment is eloquently expressed in the last stanza (1881) of William Turton's hymn text, "Lord, Who in This Eucharist Didst Say." Some contemporary hymnals have dropped this verse.

6. Kubicki, 89-90.

7. Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1974), 71.

8. Dulles, 67.

9. Henri de Lubac, *Catholicism: A Study of Dogma in Relation to Corporate Destiny of Mankind*, trans. Lancelot C. Sheppard (New York: New American Library, 1964), 29.

10. Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, trans. W. J. O'Hara (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 14.

11. *Ibid.*, 15.

12. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 13-14, [Original published as *Christus, Sacrament van de*

Godsontmoeting, Bilhoven, H. Nissisen, 1960].

13. *Ibid.*, 15.

14. Rahner, 13.

15. *Ibid.*, 18.

16. Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 166.

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*, 167.

19. Edmund Hill, "Church," in *The New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Joseph A. Komonchak, Mary Collins, and Dermot A. Lane, 185-201 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991), 185-186.

20. John Gallen, "Assembly," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Theology*, ed. Peter E. Fink, (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 71-80. See also Kubicki, *The Presence of God in the Liturgical Assembly*, 38.

21. *Ibid.*, 38.

22. See Kubicki, 46.

23. Hill, 197-198.

24. *Ibid.*, 198.

25. *Ibid.*

26. Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, study edition (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981), 593-594.

27. *Ibid.*, 595-596.

28. Kenan B. Osborne, *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World: A Theology for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 1999), 114-115.

29. *Ibid.*, 116.

30. *Ibid.*, 117. See also the explicit statements in this regard in the *Decree on Ecumenism*, *Ad Gentes*, no. 1.