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SYMBOLS

• THAT SURROUND US •

Faithful Reflections

JOHAN VAN PARYS



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CONTENTS

Foreword	v
Introduction.....	vii
CHAPTER ONE	
Signs, Symbols, and Sacraments.....	i
CHAPTER TWO	
Fundamental Symbols	13
CHAPTER THREE	
Sacred Architecture as Symbol.....	31
CHAPTER FOUR	
Sacred Art as Symbol	47
CHAPTER FIVE	
Symbolic Furnishings Used for the Liturgy	55
CHAPTER SIX	
Symbolic Objects Used for the Liturgy	65
CHAPTER SEVEN	
Symbolic Clothing Used for the Liturgy.....	81
CHAPTER EIGHT	
Symbolic Gestures in the Liturgy.....	97
CHAPTER NINE	
Senses and Seasonal Décor	115
CHAPTER TEN	
Monograms, Acronyms, and Images.....	129
Conclusion.....	149

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FOREWORD

Our lives are filled with symbols and symbolic acts, from the sign of the cross made on our forehead before we were baptized, to the pall placed on our coffin at the end of our lives. In addition, between these two milestones in our lives as Christians, symbols surround us.

Some symbols are obvious and easily understood, such as the crucifix many of us have in our homes. Others are more obscure and not as common, such as the moon under Mary's feet, or the eagle at the side of Saint John the Evangelist. Some symbols tell the story of the saints, others tell the story of our faith, while still others are an essential part of the liturgy and sacramental life of the Church. The latter are notable because the liturgy uses simple elements of our daily lives and turns them into life-altering worship symbols.

Symbols are so important in our daily and liturgical lives, it is important to make sure we are familiar with them. To that end, Johan van Parys offers an excellent introduction to some of the most significant symbols in our lives.

The aim of *Symbols That Surround Us: Faithful Reflections* is twofold. The book offers insight into our daily use of symbols and the symbolic acts that uniquely equip humans for the use of symbols in a religious context, as well as how our experience with such simple elements as water, fire, bread, and wine prepare us for their sacramental use.

Dr. van Parys then talks about our daily use of symbols and our experience with sacramental symbols on a human level, as in the primary sacramental symbols of baptismal waters, the Easter fire, and eucharistic bread and wine, as well as secondary symbols, such as a *Gospel Book*, a crucifix, or an altar table. Throughout, he offers

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opportunities to reflect on the meaning of these symbols and make further connections with our experiences of them.

The religious symbols discussed here are but a few of the many that surround us, but the groundwork the book lays encourages all of us to become more aware of and appreciate symbols on a deeper level. This understanding allows their impact to be even greater each time we encounter them in our lives of faith.

GIOVANNI CARDINAL LAJOLO

PRESIDENT EMERITUS OF THE
GOVERNORSHIP OF VATICAN CITY STATE

INTRODUCTION

Ever since I was a young boy, I have been enamored of my ninety-five-year-old great-aunt, who now lives in a retirement community in Belgium. She has always been beautiful and extremely captivating. Throughout her life, she enjoyed a successful career and has lived most of her adult life in a beautiful home in Brussels, the capital of Belgium.

After her husband died, she moved back to our small hometown to live in a retirement community. I went to visit her there not long after I learned she was suffering from dementia. As I knocked somewhat hesitantly and walked into her room, she nodded to invite me in. As we visited, she seemed physically well, and she talked about her life in a very animated way. I quickly realized, though, that she did not know who I was, which saddened me a great deal. As I got ready to leave, I asked if I could kiss her farewell. She agreed, and when I leaned in to kiss her cheeks, tears began streaming down her face. She looked at me and she said: “Johan, how sad that I did not recognize you. When will you come to see me again?” I cried with her, but by the time I left she had already forgotten who I was.

Although this may sound like a fairy tale, it was as if my kiss woke her up. Beyond our conversation and all the information I had provided her to prove that I was her grand-nephew, she only recognized me in what seemed a small gesture of my love. Yet for her, it had a profound impact.

My experience with my aunt is exactly how symbols work. That which appears simple or ordinary can hold great meaning. Symbols enable us to communicate on a deeper level when we do not have the words to do so. In a religious context, symbols enable us to express our faith in ways that would not be possible if we were to rely exclu-

sively on words. Simple and unassuming water and bread in the right context have a great impact on those who encounter them. If a picture is worth a thousand words, then a symbol is surely worth a million.

Although we may not always be aware of them, symbols surround us, connect us to sacred images found in our churches, remind us of our faith, and support us in our private and public prayer as we celebrate the sacraments and engage in private devotions.

There are ten chapters in this book. The first chapter distinguishes between signs and symbols by looking at how symbols are essential to our sacraments. The second chapter reflects on our human experience and the fundamental symbols that are used for the liturgy: water, fire and light, oil, bread, and wine. The next two chapters look at the symbolic nature of the buildings in which we celebrate the liturgy and the symbolic contribution of the arts within them. The remaining chapters observe how liturgical furnishings, objects, vestments, and gestures function symbolically, and the concluding chapters consider the role of liturgical décor and sacred imagery. Each chapter concludes with a set of questions intended to encourage your own reflection on the many symbols we encounter in our daily lives.

May this journey through the rich world of symbols enrich your experience of the images that surround you to enhance your faith, your celebration of the liturgy, and all your encounters of prayer.

*Statue of the Immaculate Conception covered with shell leis,
St. Benedict Catholic Church, Kailua-Kona, Hawaii*



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CHAPTER ONE

SIGNS, SYMBOLS, AND SACRAMENTS

I recently spoke with friends about how a bouquet of flowers can mean something very different to those who receive them. They can symbolize love and affection if shared between people who care for one another. However, if the affection is not mutual, the same flowers can be experienced as annoying or even considered a form of stalking. It is amazing that a simple bouquet of flowers can stir such strong feelings as love or fear so completely that an explanatory note is not needed. The flowers themselves communicate the message.

Though people most often communicate through spoken language, we enjoy many other ways to convey messages. Our body language, the way we dress, and established signs and

Easter Vigil, The Basilica of Saint Mary, Minneapolis

symbols—such as wedding rings, uniforms, and even hairstyles—inform others about who we are, what we do, and how we live. All these nonverbal exchanges are important in our daily lives and perhaps even more so when we express our faith and celebrate our liturgies.

The sacraments, for example, consist of two essential elements that have come to be known as the *form* and the *matter* of a sacrament. The *form* is the verbal portion, or the words that are spoken during the celebration of the sacrament, such as when “I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” is declared in the celebration of baptism. The *matter* is the symbol that is used for the conferral of the sacrament, such as the water in the sacrament of baptism and the oil in the sacrament of confirmation. The words or *form* of the sacrament communicate rich theological truths that reveal the essence of the sacrament. Still, it is not until the words or *form* are united with the symbol or matter that the sacrament is realized. What would baptism be without water? Or Eucharist without bread or wine? Symbols are essential for the celebration of the sacraments.

This is why it is important to understand how our daily nonverbal communication forms an understanding for our use of symbols, as well as how signs and symbols are similar and yet different from one another. This foundation enables us to understand the symbols that enrich our liturgies more fully and thus engage in the celebration of the sacraments more deeply.

VERBAL VERSUS NONVERBAL LANGUAGE

Some years ago, I was presenting a lecture to a group of undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame. The topic was “Eucharistic Miracles,” and I was well-prepared with images, music, and poetry. Yet none of the information about eucharistic miracles during the Middle Ages appeared to engage the students. They slouched in their chairs, yawned, showed little interest, and didn’t take a single note. Afterward, one of the students congratulated me on the lecture, and although I heard his words, it was hard for me to believe him

because of his slouching body language throughout my presentation. Though he said one thing, his posture communicated a much stronger message that was quite the opposite. This is but one example of the complexities of communication. Our message system is more than just words. Much of our communication occurs nonverbally and spills far beyond the linear sentences we share.

As with the students, our body language communicates great amounts of information. A smile can imply joy at an encounter. Our tears reveal sorrow. A wink may disarm an otherwise tense situation with its playfulness. There are also unfortunate and even unintended messages that body language can communicate, not unlike that of the students in my class. When we take this understanding of body language into the realm of worship, we might think about those who casually saunter up to receive holy Communion apparently distracted by everything around them. Though they may not realize the casual stance they express about receiving our Lord in the Eucharist, others may be scandalized by what appears to be disrespect.

The way we dress is also a form of communication and reveals how we regard the event we are attending. When I was preparing to move to the United States, I was invited to the U.S. Embassy in Brussels for a seminar on appropriate behavior in U.S. society. One of the topics presented was on



A Sister of Charity

appropriate dress. The instructor suggested that people in the U.S. dress much more informally than Europeans. However, the instructor stressed there were different “levels” of informal dress. She explained that informal dress appropriate for a baseball game was not the same as what might be worn for a company barbecue, and that appropriate attire for the beach is different than what is worn for a run around the lake. Clothing indeed communicates much more than what the

casual wearer might intend, even in the most informal of settings. This awareness of how clothing communicates becomes even clearer when we consider what is worn for more formal occasions. Most of us would not dream of wearing shorts, a rock concert T-shirt, and beach sandals to a funeral because it would not show the respect we would want to express to the deceased by more formal attire. In its most formal version, clothing can be highly symbolic, as at a wedding or during the celebration of any liturgy. If all the women guests wore long white gowns at a wedding ceremony, it would be quite confusing. Culture and custom dictate that only one woman wears white at a wedding, and that is the bride. And it is ritual garb that enables us to distinguish between deacons, priests, and bishops.

THE IMPORTANCE OF SIGNS AND SYMBOLS IN OUR DAILY LIVES

Most of us respond to daily messages communicated by signs and symbols, even if we do not notice it. We slow down and stop at a red light. We cross the street at a white-striped crosswalk. We give a heart-shaped box of chocolates on Valentine's Day. We exchange



promise rings. We send flowers. We embrace. These are but a few of the many signs and symbols we might encounter in our lives. Signs and symbols communicate a lot in a little time, such as at a traffic light, or when words are not enough, as in the embrace received when someone close to us wants to offer comfort. In these situations, we rely on either signs or symbols to convey a fuller message than what is shared on the surface. Signs and symbols are closely related, yet they are different. What's the difference?

The word "sign" comes from the Latin word *signum*, meaning "mark." Essentially, signs are images that convey definite and com-

munally agreed-upon information. Signs tell us to do or not to do something specific, such as to give right-of-way or drive no faster than thirty-five miles per hour.

Signs can only mean one thing. There can be no confusion about the meaning of a sign. When we see a red circular sign with a white bar in the middle, we know not to enter. There are different words on this sign all over the world, but its shape, red color, and white crossbar have acquired a meaning that communicates “do not enter,” so we don’t.

For the most part, a sign is chosen arbitrarily, and the connection between the sign and its meaning is random. There is neither a necessary nor even a natural connection between the meaning that it points at or signifies. A stop sign is octagonal or eight-sided for no particular reason. As a result, people have to learn how to read signs or understand their shape and color associations, such as with most traffic signs, before they can use them.

By contrast, symbols are not arbitrary and can communicate multiple levels of meaning at the same time. Symbols are multifaceted, meaning they have many sides or ways to be understood. Symbols don’t just tell us to do something or to refrain from doing something. Symbols point to something beyond themselves. Symbols are able to communicate levels of meanings that lie far beyond the direct and immediate awareness of the people who interact with symbols.

“Symbol” is derived from the Greek word *symballein*, meaning “to throw together, to bring together, or to connect.” The concrete meaning of this word goes back to the Greek custom of writing the name of friends on a shard or fragment of pottery. When the friends had to leave one another, the shard would be broken and each friend would take a piece. When they reunited, sometimes years later, their friendship was confirmed by the fact that the pieces that were brought together connected perfectly. A symbol works in a similar manner as it brings together different realities, visible ones and nonvisible ones, and connects them to form a meaning that is far beyond the visible reality.

A simple definition of a “symbol” is something that can be seen, heard, tasted, or felt by the human senses that calls forth another

experience that is usually immaterial, not concrete, and cannot be sensed. In order for symbols to work, there needs to be a connection between the human experience of the symbol and the deeper reality they symbolize. We are, for instance, able to make connections between water and baptism because the cleansing power of water helps us understand baptism as a symbol for divine cleansing. Our human experience of the destructive power of water helps us to connect to water's ability to bring about death, which in turn connects to our participation in the death of Jesus. The fact that water sustains life and that life is born out of water also allows water to symbolize our new birth into the Church through the waters of baptism. Contrary to signs, symbols thus are not chosen arbitrarily.



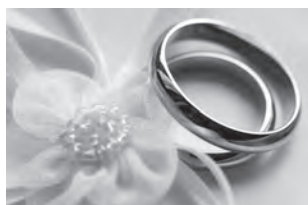
*Baptism by immersion,
Cathedral of the Holy Angels, Los Angeles*

Symbols also require a certain context in order to work. Water does not always function as a symbol. It only becomes a symbol in a liturgical context. When we use water for washing dishes, the water is nothing but dishwater. When we use it for bathing, it is nothing but bath water. But when we use water for baptism, it becomes a symbol that holds great meaning. During the celebration of the sacrament, water is no longer ordinary. It becomes baptismal water that cleanses us from sin and drowns us in the death of Jesus so we may rise with him again. Baptismal water is our entry into the Christian community. It births us into the Church. Contrary to signs, symbols only work within a specific context.

Although there is some learning involved when relating to symbols, there is also an immediacy that allows us to connect more quickly and directly. When we place our hand on a hot stove-top, we do not carefully process what is happening before removing our hand. Our reaction is direct and immediate. We quickly remove our hand! Symbols, especially primary symbols like water or fire, ought to inspire

a similar reaction. Symbols communicate immediately and directly, but not everything is communicated at once. That is the beauty of symbols. Like all good relationships, there is a fullness to their meaning that continues to deepen over time. We discover more levels of meaning as we continue to encounter a symbol.

This complexity of meanings is the main difference between signs and symbols. Signs need to be extremely simple and clear, while symbols enjoy a level of ambiguity. Signs communicate one message, while symbols create a greater meaning that leads to a deeper understanding. Signs are used when there is not enough time to communicate a message in words, as with traffic signs. Symbols are often used when words cannot possibly suffice.



DAILY SYMBOLS AND SACRED SYMBOLS

One day, my fourteen-year-old niece proudly showed me her “promise” ring. She then told me about a boy in her class

she liked very much. She understood that she was too young to date, but she was so pleased that he had given her this ring. When I asked her what the ring meant to her, she explained that it represented their promise to one another, and that one day they would get married.

I was moved by the innocence and even the naiveté of my niece, but I was also amazed at the layers of meaning that were heaped upon the simple string tied around her finger. It was a far cry from any engagement diamond that might signify a future marriage; however, as a symbol of a lofty promise it was very important to her.

We are all surrounded by symbols and use them on a daily basis as we struggle to express the inexpressible marvel at the birth of a baby, the depth of our love when celebrating a birthday or an anniversary, or the layers of deep emotions we experience when a loved one becomes ill or dies. In such situations, when we don’t quite know what to say or when we fear our words will fall short, we reach for

symbols. Even when we look for a card to accompany flowers, the card itself becomes a symbol of our feelings far beyond the printed words or any that we write by hand. The very act of giving the card becomes a symbol of care. Indeed, we are symbolic people, although we might not always be cognizant of this or aware of how we live out this reality in our daily lives.

When it comes to our faith, we use symbols even more readily to approach that which by definition cannot be explained or captured by words: the mysteries of creation and salvation. While science tries to explain certain aspects of these mysteries, symbols seek to reveal meaning as they invite us into an ever-deepening contemplation. The liturgy and the sacraments of the Catholic Church use symbols to share meaning and reveal deeper meaning. This is the language of symbols.

SACRED SYMBOLS AND SACRAMENTS

What Is a Sacrament?

The word “sacrament” comes from the Latin *sacramentum*. It was borrowed by early Christian writers from its pre-Christian use in the Roman army, where it referred to the binding relationship between a soldier and his commander. The unbreak-

able relationship between the two was sealed by a *sacramentum* and consisted of an oath or pledge of fidelity sworn by the soldier to the commander. It also included a kind of branding by the commander on the soldier’s body to indicate that he was bound to this particular commander until death. The Romans understood a *sacramentum* as both words and action that sealed a binding relationship.

Tertullian, one of the great early Christian writers, who died around the year 220 CE, borrowed this word when he described



*The imposition of hands during
an ordination to the priesthood*

“initiation” as a *sacramentum* that consisted of an oath, which in this case was the profession of faith and baptismal formula, and a branding that occurred through water and oil.

Saint Augustine, who died in 430 CE, continued this practice when he described a *sacramentum* as a sacred sign or a visible word that included both a verbal and material element. This understanding eventually led to the distinction between matter, the material element present in a sacrament, such as bread and wine for the Eucharist, and the form, or verbal formula, such as the words, “receive the gifts of the Holy Spirit,” as is used in the sacrament of confirmation. This pattern of matter and form characterizes each of our sacraments and continues to be present in the accompanying rituals until today, as we see in the current *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The catechism defines a sacrament as an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.

The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament. They bear fruit in those who receive them with the required dispositions (Catechism of the Catholic Church, 1131).

There are seven sacraments, each with its own matter and form. The Church has also discovered a symbol that offers the matter or the material element connected with the sacrament.

They are as follows:

Baptism	water
Reconciliation	confession of sins and penance
Confirmation	oil of chrism
Eucharist	bread and wine
Anointing of the sick	oil of the sick and laying on of hands
Holy orders	the imposition of hands
Marriage	mutual consent of a couple to be married to one another

How Do Sacraments Make Use of Symbols?

Sacraments and symbols connect intimately with one another in the matter and form relationship. Symbols are the material aspect or the “form” of the sacrament. Each of the seven sacraments has its own matter and thus its own symbol. The matter and symbol for the sacraments of initiation, three sacraments by which we become full members of the Church, are water for baptism, oil of chrism for confirmation, and bread and wine for the Eucharist.

These sacramental symbols are meaningful because humans instinctively relate to symbols and because we relate to the symbols used in the sacraments on a presymbolic level in our daily life. Why is this so?

Humans have the capacity to be symbolic beings. Not only can we communicate with one another in a literal manner that already sets us apart from other life forms, we also communicate in a symbolic manner that sets us even more apart from other life forms, such as animals. We give flowers on Mother’s Day and chocolate on Valentine’s Day as a symbol of our love. We could more easily say, “I love you,” and not buy presents, but somehow these gifts have become symbols that enhance and underline our vows of love in a way that make them more concrete. They are something we can touch and share to show our love more completely.

Sacramental symbols help us experience our faith more fully because we relate to them on a presymbolic or instinctive level that goes beyond our conscious thought. Oil is present everywhere in our lives. We use oil in our food, thus it has a nourishing aspect. We use oil to

*The elevation of
the Eucharist*



soothe and heal our skin when it is burnt, thus it has a healing aspect. Oil also harbors a destructive power with the ability to explode or spread fire. Thus oil has the ability to sustain life while it can also cause death. Our human experience of oil allows it to communicate the many forms of God's salvific work in the person and in the Church when it is used for two of the sacraments of initiation: baptism and confirmation, as well as for holy orders and the anointing of the sick.

FAITHFUL REFLECTIONS

Signs and symbols have been a part of our life since we were born. Although we might not notice it, we rely on many nonverbal elements of communication in our daily life. In our worship, our instinctive and presymbolic relationship with symbols allow us to connect with the sacramental symbols that have become part of the liturgical richness of Christian gatherings throughout history. The nonverbal elements that are a part of our Church symbols are important because they make up the matter for the celebration of the sacraments, beyond any words or form. I invite you to take some time to remember the relationships of faith and spirit and the nonverbal communication that have formed you as you consider these questions.

- ◆ *Think back to an important moment in your life, either of great joy or great sadness. What do you remember the most? Do you have mementos of those moments? How do you treat them?*
- ◆ *What are some symbols you have used to communicate with a loved one or shared with someone during times of sadness or joy or just because you wanted to do so?*
- ◆ *How have you experienced the power of symbols in the sacraments? What has been your favorite encounter? Why?*