

Sacraments & Mission:
gift, burden, risk and calling.

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“In the sacrament of the Eucharist, Jesus shows us in particular the *truth about the love* which is the very essence of God. It is this evangelical truth which challenges each of us and our whole being. For this reason, the Church, which finds in the Eucharist the very centre of her life, is constantly concerned to proclaim to all, *opportune importune* (cf. *2 Tim 4:2*), that God is love.” Benedict XI *Sacramentum Caritatis 2*

As Catholic Christians, and as evangelisers, these sentences of Pope Benedict XVI will resonate deeply with us. They speak, with our own hearts and intellects, of that central, *crucial* importance of the sacraments, and especially the Eucharist, for our faith, and mission. In the sacramental economy our whole existence, the very fabric of our being (*ontology*), is taken up into the Paschal Mystery and transformed; and, again and again, the sacraments enable us to meet, in our own bodiliness, the great and saving love of the Father, who sent His Son, for our fulness of life in the Spirit, and for the salvation of all people. We are a people of sacrament.

We are also a people of *mission*. The Church has always been essentially missionary; but we are, perhaps, beginning to realise this anew today, as our own deepening of the tradition of evangelisation takes place in a culture which is, in its own ways, crying out for hope, love - and, I would suggest, faith. Bishop Hendricks has given us a clear and thoughtful picture of that culture: a context of some difficulties, but also of the search for meaning. It is here that we learn the centrality of the Church's call to evangelise. As Pope John Paul II wrote, evangelisation is what the Church is *for*:

“The Church wishes to serve this single end: that each person may be able to find Christ, in order that Christ may walk with each person the path of life, with the power of the truth about man and the world that is contained in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Redemption and with the power of the love that is radiated by that truth.” (*Redemptor Hominis* art. 13)

And, at the end of his pontificate, John Paul II directly related sacrament and mission, when he taught:

“The Eucharist thus appears as both the source and the summit of all evangelisation, since its goal is the communion of mankind with Christ and in him with the Father and the Holy Spirit.” (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia* 22)

But if it is clear that sacrament and mission lie at the very heart of the Church’s life and faith, it is also the case that the relation between the two is not always easy or self-evident. Indeed, for some there can be seen to be an uneasy tension between the ‘internal’ Church practices of sacrament and liturgy, and the urgent outward looking call to mission, and to social justice.¹ From a liberationist perspective the preoccupation of the Church with matters liturgical while much of the world starves and lives under oppression can be scandalous enough to be decried as ‘our pagan insistence on the altar.’² Certainly in many of our parishes and dioceses the experience is that support of liturgy is considerably easier to facilitate than an active awareness of evangelisation.

For all that, as Catholic evangelisers we will necessarily have hearts for sacrament-and-mission; this is an entirely appropriate and authentic instinct. It is just this instinct which led the authors of *On the Way to Life*³ to conclude that it is our Catholic sacramental sense - our ‘sacramental imagination’ - which is one of the greatest gifts in the tasks of handing on the faith today. Our intimacy with Divine Love, granted us in the sacraments, offers us not only sacramental grace and strength for our Christian living, but also a whole new way of *seeing* the world - a way of imaging which brings together the sacred mysteries and the ordinary. All this, in a cultural context where ‘the ordinary’ is generally experienced as mundane, dull, meaningless, even hopeless. Celebrating sacraments (which, as we will see, involves us in more than simply liturgical events) *changes everything*.

It is clear enough that the sacramental tradition is instinctively recognised as a great gift to, and for, evangelisation. This much we know. But to describe sacrament as gift - as *munus* - is also to name it as both *burden*; and *task*, or *calling*. And to recognise *this* is to suggest that receiving our sacramental sense as a gift into our evangelising practices, involves us in moments of *risk*. For gifts, as burdens and callings, require discernment for their nurture and effectiveness.

¹ So see Richard McBrien’s comments on the Church as ‘sacrament: A Dulles *Models of the Church* (2nd ed. Gill and Macmillan 1987) p 74-75.

² L Segundo *The Sacraments Today* (1973) p. 8. A milder, but just as challenging, account of the sacrament-justice tension can be found in Enda McDonagh’s “Fruit of the earth, work of human hands: a prophetic theology of the Eucharist.” in, Mary Grey et al (eds.) *The Candles are Still Burning*. (Geoffrey Chapman 1995) pp 22 ff.

³ *On the Way to Life*. A Report for the Catholic Education service of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of England and Wales 2005. From now on referred to as *OTWTL*.

Today we will explore this *munus* of the sacraments for evangelisation. This involves, to begin with, a look at how the sacraments speak - and fail in speaking - to our various contexts and cultures. With this sense of gift and burden in mind, I then want to offer, from the Church’s own sacramental tradition, some thoughts which might help us in deepening our reflection on mission and sacrament. In particular, I want to explore ways of developing a sense of the ‘peri-liturgical sacramental’ - the sacramental ‘around’, before and after, the liturgical celebration of sacraments - and so open up the potential of the language of *sacramentality* as a way of thinking about sacrament-and mission in today’s living of our faith.

A. The gift and risk of sacrament for evangelisation today

i) the gracing of the ordinary - sight transformed

The ‘sacramental imagination’⁴ has been seen as of especial importance as offering hope in the realms of the ordinary. In particular, what *On the Way to Life* refers to as ‘the burden of the ordinary’, is transformed precisely by the sacramental vision that sees that the things of the ordinary can be - and indeed, are - the means of grace. Both in the particular assured way of the sacraments of the Church, and in the prayerful attentiveness to the small things of daily life (so vividly embodied by St. Therese), grace is mediated through apparently ordinary things. In a culture burdened by its own ordinariness sacraments can thus offer a true message of hope. This is the fundamental gift of sacrament for evangelisation - the service of bringing all things, however seemingly ordinary, to Christ.

Reflecting on this gift further can enable us to recognise how the sacraments have the potential *to transform our seeing* - offering a new vision of truth and hope and love to the world: baptised into Christ’s death and resurrection, the puzzle of life and death has, in some sense, already been taken up for us into eternal life. We might reasonably be expected to see life - and especially death - from a changed perspective. In Baptism, in Reconciliation and in the Anointing of the Sick, we become a people who *know*, at the deepest level of our being, the boundless generosity of God’s love and forgiveness; this, too, changes the way we see the world, its loves, its flaws, and its cruelties. Centrally, we are a people formed, fed, and transformed, day by day, week by week, by the Mystery of the Eucharist. We receive, and are called into, the sacrificial love of God in Christ; and strengthened and sent out in the Spirit as disciples for the Kingdom - missionaries.

This is an extraordinary vision to be granted. But what happens when we try to communicate this into our own culture? In an age characterised by its desire for

⁴ OTWTL op. cit. pp 63 -65. See also the very helpful book, Daniel O’Leary *Begin with the Heart. Recovering a Sacramental Vision*. (Columba Press, 2008)

the magical, the mystical, the ‘spiritual’ *without* traditions, laws, disciplines, how are we to speak of this sacramental sense beyond ‘new age’ type categories? Our proper enthusiasm for some kind of ‘sacramental imagination’, carries with it the *risk* of being heard simply as ‘a nice way of looking at things’ - that everything is good and holy and blessed. This is *not* the message of the Sacraments, rooted as they are in Christ’s Passion and Resurrection! The risk of ‘sacramental imagination’ is that it might leave our materialist, reductionist culture *still* at the level of human imaginings - that is to say, *idolatry*. The sacraments themselves are not about their own reality, but are ‘sacraments of’, anticipating what is beyond the here and now. The very gift of sacraments - their here-and-nowness, their material, sensible reality - can also be their risk in evangelisation, unless we find vivid and powerful ways of speaking of their source (in the Trinity and the drama of salvation), and their end (heaven, the New Jerusalem).

ii) sacraments and performance

These thoughts lead me to two other, more specific observations about the gift and burden of sacrament in mission. The first of these refers to ways in which sacraments, by their very nature, are celebrated *as events*. Sacraments are, after all, liturgical; and our celebrations of the Mass, and of Baptisms, Confirmations, Marriages, Ordinations are, quite properly the gathering of communities to celebrate both ritually, and in human, festive ways.

Now, no one is happier than I am, when, at the end of a ‘special’ celebration of Mass in the parish, visitors, often with no formal faith of their own, express their feelings of joy, peace, consolation, or sense of meaning regarding their participation in the service. For sure, this is, itself, a grace, and, potentially, a sensing of God’s presence. Still, it seems to me that we should have a certain reflective caution about this. Our society has been characterised as one of ‘frenetic longeurs’,⁵ of people whose basic sense of tedium and meaninglessness makes them (us!) restless seekers after ‘the next big thing’. We love the big event; our young people, in particular, live lives punctuated by performances of one kind or another. Still, we can pass through such one-off delights, and move on, or back into our ordinary lives without a further thought about what lay behind such excitement.

It is, quite probably, a good pastoral instinct that suggests to us that this cultural desire for events, performance, great music, lighting effects and the excitement of the crowd can be responded to by our own liturgical sacramental traditions. These too, for good reason, feed our human senses in their bringing of us into participation in Christ’s mystery. *We* know that it is not the performance and the excitement that brings us to Mass (which is just as well, for most of us!) But how, in our eagerness to share the beauty and meaning of the sacraments do we ensure

⁵ OTWTL pp 23-25

that we don't only communicate 'good performance', an anthropological construction of meaning or spirituality? How do we enable the *event* of sacraments to be properly broken open, beyond performance, to Divine Presence and Love?

iii) sacraments and community

Similar questions might be raised about our practices and understanding of community in the missionary activity of the Church. Recent research suggests that the language and experience of 'community' is a dominant one in most initiatives which identify themselves as concerned with 'evangelisation', or 'renewal for evangelisation'.⁶ Repeatedly, those leading such work, and, more significantly, those drawn to the work, both from within the visible Church, and from further afield, testify to the importance of 'community' for deepening their involvement with the Christian faith. For Catholics, in particular, the celebration of Mass is seen as central to such community - we are, we often seem to say, essentially 'eucharistic communities'.

Such an emphasis on community is, again, a sure instinct of faith, as we recognise the extra-ordinary gift of being 'one Body', in Christ - for all our differences; and as we recognise this as, especially, a gift for which our own society is crying out. A culture in which the progressive isolation of the individual in their search for meaning has forced us all to be "spinners and weavers" of our own 'truth'⁷, forms people who will often delight in the prospect of 'belonging', of being included, of sharing meaning and identity with a community of which they are a full and unconditional part. Indeed, the language of inclusivity and belonging has a profound potency within our society. How good it is, then, to recognise in the 'ordinary' life of Christian sacramental gathering a response to this need, and the rites of welcome and initiation which can enable people to belong, to be included in a shared identity.

But then I wonder: what sort of 'community' is our Eucharistic community? To be sure, there are striking ways in which it can be seen as inclusive and welcoming and even permissive in its sheer diversity of backgrounds. For all that, it is not so much a community, fundamentally, as a *communion*; more than that, it is a communion *in Christ*. This is a particular kind of eschatologically orientated community, whose practice of a certain discipline of life and prayer, recognises not only the boundless welcoming love of the Father, but also the costliness of discipleship, with its following of Jesus, the bearing of His Cross. Ultimately this

⁶ So see *Living Church in the Global City*. A Report of the research carried out by "Action Research Church and Society" (ARCS), based at Heythrop College, University of London. (2008) See p 29 esp. The report can be downloaded at: www.rcc.ac.uk/downloads/pdf_files/ARCS%2520Report%25202008.pdf

⁷ OTWTL p 20

community of the Spirit knows itself fully not in the here and now, but in the time to come. The question then arises, how is this rather more ‘counter-cultural’ notion of community as *communion-in-Christ* to break through in our gathering around the sacraments? How do our baptismal practices, our celebrations of Mass, our pre- and post- Marriage catechesis - how do these things evangelise not only into community, but into costly discipleship, and ‘the things of heaven’ (Col iii 1)?

So far I have simply sought to raise some questions about the ways in which sacraments are both a gift and a responsibility for us in evangelisation. That I do not attempt to offer much by way of answers is both deliberate and appropriate; I think these are matters to be discerned in conversation, together, and repeatedly. However, I will conclude by setting out some of the ways in which I personally think the questions of sacrament and mission might be fruitfully approached. All these ways (and there are more than I can outline here), involve us not so much in sacramental celebrations as community events, but rather in what I have rather clumsily termed ‘the peri-liturgical sacramental’.

B. Evangelisation and the peri-liturgical sacramental

Perhaps something first needs to be said by way of clarifying this ungainly term! I am using it simply to draw attention to the evangelising significance of what goes before, and follows on from the liturgical celebration of the sacraments proper. In other words, it’s the living and mission that goes on *around* (*peri*) the sacramental liturgies that I want to look at.

Bi) mission and the pre-liturgical sacramental

Before any of us - churched or un-churched - arrive at a celebration of sacraments (even as infants!), we have already received some kind of formation from the life we have lived up to that point. Our ability to *see* the reality of what is going on will, almost inevitably, be shaped by such human and cultural, as well as any catechetical, formation. In many ways, the difficulties with sacrament and mission which I have been trying to raise so far can be seen succinctly, in these terms: the difficulty of truly seeing sacraments for what they, in Christ, are.

In terms of evangelisation such a common-sense observation might alert us to a sharper question: given the cultural and family formation that so many of us receive to day, what enables and disables us from this kind of true seeing of the

sacraments? I have been suggesting that certain cultural factors - materialism, an emphasis on the bodily, on community, and on a certain ‘mystical’ reading of spirituality, together with an appetite for event and performance - all make the seeing of sacramental realities problematic today. And this is, of course, true for many of us visibly participating in the sacramental Body of the Church, as well as for those outside its visible boundaries. Pre-liturgy we are being prepared (in good and less good ways) for the participation possible to us in any sacramental celebration. What goes on in the pre-liturgical sacramental moments is of enormous missiological and catechetical significance: it effects what we see, and sense in the sacraments.

There are a couple of points from the tradition which I would like to mention here, as helps in our consideration of the pre-liturgical sacramental. First, it is worth remembering that our own Catholic Christian tradition emphasises the gracedness, as well as fallenness, of human cultures. Before any sacrament of the Church, graces have been and will be received. (Fr. David will have a better and more helpful reading of this later on.)

A second point, however, is drawn from the sometimes rather technical theological language of sacramental reality. As thinking about sacraments developed (and such thinking has a lively - even stormy history, let us remember) - a way for thinking about the different aspects of sacramental reality was articulated. This is the language of *sacramentum*; *sacramentum et res*; and *res*.

We can understand the *sacramentum tantum* as the external or sensible sign. The first effect of this sign is the *sacramentum et res* - the thing that is effected by the rite: for example, in Baptism, it is the baptismal character; in Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ. But there is a second effect, caused by the *sacramentum et res* - that is, the *res tantum*, the ‘thing’ in itself. This is the ultimate effect of the sacrament - sacramental grace.

My purposes for raising this way of understanding here, is that it can alert us to the ‘layers’ of sacramental reality. To speak of ‘sacrament’ is not to speak of one simple thing - neither liturgical, nor grace, nor effective sign - but something much more complex and mysterious. We may (and we may not!) truly see the effective sign, and even understand its symbolic significance deeply; we may glimpse something in our real encounter with the *sacramentum et res*, all be it, often, only partially effective in us, and sometimes even unconsciously. But what our tradition is consistent about is that effective participation in the *res tantum* cannot be taken for granted in our sacramental reception. We can - and indeed do - see, and not see; receive, and not receive.

The point here is that the sacramental tradition does, itself, make sacramental grace something of an end point in a longer journey; one that, in reality, we can only be brought to through pre-liturgical catechesis, discipline, and repentance, and the on-going preparation of Christian daily living in charity. We should not, and cannot expect the sacraments to be self-evident; and we can sometimes run the risk, in our love of the sacraments, of bringing people - ourselves included - too quickly and eagerly to them.

I think it is this that lies behind the ancient ways of catechumenal preparation. In the early Church the catechumens left the celebration of the Eucharist after the liturgy of the Word; indeed, the bulk - if not all - of their sacramental catechesis and participation took place in the teaching of the *Mystagogy* after baptism at Easter. Here sacraments are presented as a certain ‘end-point’, or turning point, in the process of evangelisation, preceded by what might be a very lengthy, difficult, even dangerous, approach. It is, I suggest, an ancient practice we might learn from. In particular, it raises the question for me, about how we might evangelise (and catechise) *toward* sacraments, allowing our all-important sense of the sacramental to shape and direct our pre-liturgical living and mission?

Bii) mission and the post-liturgical sacramental

One way of answering this is to look also at the post-liturgical sacramental. To shift our attention to what happens after (*post*) our liturgical celebration is in tune with the ancient Eastern tradition of referring to ‘liturgy after the liturgy’ as a way of describing the living of Christian life formed by the sacraments. So, Anastasios Yannoulatos writes:

“Each of the faithful is called upon to continue a personal liturgy on the secret altar of his own heart, to realize a living proclamation of the good news ‘for the sake of the kingdom’. Without this continuation the liturgy remains incomplete...” (cited by Ion Bria *The Liturgy after the Liturgy*, WCC Publications, 1996. p 20)

Something of this is also powerfully reflected in the way in which Pope Benedict XVI frames his teaching about the Eucharist with a threefold pattern, concerning the sacrament as believed, celebrated and *lived*. He, too, is clear about the ‘extension’ of sacrament beyond the liturgical:

“Christians, in all their actions, are called to offer true worship to God. Here the intrinsically eucharistic nature of Christian life begins to take shape. The Eucharist, since it embraces the concrete, everyday existence of the believer, makes possible, day by day, the progressive transfiguration of all those called by grace to reflect the image of the Son of God (cf. *Rom 8:29ff.*). There is nothing authentically human – our thoughts and affections, our words and deeds – that does not find in

the sacrament of the Eucharist the form it needs to be lived to the full...” (*Sacramentum Caritatis* 71)

Sacraments are, of course, celebrated in ‘events’; but they are celebrated, too, in the sacramental living of those who, day by day, are sent out in the power of these evangelising sacraments.

Again, our tradition encourages us in this view. Our understanding of certain sacraments as conferring an indelible ‘character’ on the one baptised, confirmed, or ordained, underlines the essentially ‘to-be-lived-daily’ nature of sacramental grace. In these three sacraments especially, and, in a different way, in marriage, the on-going, post-event, post-liturgical sacramental is vividly attested to in the theology - although we still often fail to see it, or nurture it in practice. In this diversity of sacramental living, we are gathered together around the Eucharist, and share ‘in communion’; but we must remember that we do so at a celebration we commonly call “mass” - a liturgy named by its end point, its sending out, for mission (*ite missa est!*) The sacraments are celebrated liturgically, but they call us out of liturgy as priests, prophets and sovereigns as evangelists! - to and in God’s whole world.

From this a number of questions for reflection properly arise: how is my ‘eucharistic living’ evidenced in my daily life, beyond attending Mass? How is it filled with sacrifice, thanksgiving, and self-gift? How is my baptismal vocation, as priest, prophet and sovereign truly present in what I do and say? When people meet me, in what ways do they encounter someone who has been buried already with Christ and now lives life in anticipation of resurrection in Him? How do these sacraments truly inform my own missionary spirituality?

Perhaps, then, one of the most powerful gifts of sacrament for evangelisation needs to be seen in our own sacramental transformation for mission. The on-going, day to day living of Baptism, Eucharist, Reconciliation and the rest involves the embodying in action of these sacramental graces. Such embodiment is where ‘sacramental imagination’ might authentically be developed; and where we might learn a greater attentiveness to the graces that the Spirit continues to pour into the world ahead of our own missionary endeavours. It is this attentiveness which can teach us to speak not only of sacraments but of *sacramentality* - that mystery of grace at work in the world, in the unexpected, as well as expected and assured, places we enter. Above all, I believe, these rather brief and sketchy explorations into sacrament and mission, call us to an extensive and daily realisation of the sacramental graces we receive - a vision which, because of the liturgies, sees what goes before and after in a new way, and so equips us to co-operate with the *missio Dei* as the Spirit calls us forward.