

The meaning of sacrament and its links with creation and incarnation,

by Brian McKinlay

It is only when God speaks and awakens human faith that the natural object becomes sacramental. But this can happen to material things only because this is a sacramental universe, because God created all things visible and invisible.

- Donald M. Baillie

I

From earliest times, Christians have understood the universe to be created as a testimony and revelation of the Emmanuel - God with us. This presence of God is celebrated in many ways, including through rites that have come to be known as "sacraments". This essay looks at the idea of "sacrament" and how it is related to God's work in creation and presence with us in the incarnation of Jesus Christ.

The Latin term *sacramentum* was used by Tertullian to indicate a matter that would be a secret but for revelation, a concealed power or principle or the hidden meaning of a symbol.¹ Tertullian used "sacrament" to refer to the "mystery" of salvation, and "sacraments" to refer to the symbols or rites associated with this salvation in the life of the church. From the earliest times there had been an association between the "mystery" of God's saving work in Christ and the rituals of baptism and the eucharist.²

Later, Augustine used various definitions to explain his idea that a sacrament required a relationship between a sign or symbol³ and the thing signified. He described sacraments as a "visible form of invisible grace" and "a sign of a sacred thing."⁴ The sign must bear some resemblance to the thing signified.⁵

The medieval church debated the definition of sacrament over many years, seeking to refine Augustine's understanding.⁶ Hugo of St. Victor (1140) required that

¹ Mat.3.11; Ro.11.25; Col.1.26, 2 Th.2.7, Re.1.20; 17.7.

² Alister E. McGrath, *Christian theology : an introduction*. - 2nd ed. - Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1997, pp. 496-7; see also: Joseph Martos, *Doors to the sacred: a historical introduction to the sacraments of the Catholic Church*. - Rev. ed. - Liguori: Triumph, 1991, p. 29.

³ I have not drawn out differences between "sign" and "symbol". However, with the work of Susanne Langer (*Philosophy in a new key*. - Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1942), contemporary scholarship has made such a distinction. See: Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in religious education and liturgy*. - Birmingham, Al.: Religious Education Pr., 1985, pp. 74ff.

⁴ Augustine of Hippo, *Letters* 138,1.

⁵ McGrath, *Christian theology*, p. 497.

⁶ For a discussion of medieval sacramental theology, see Alasdair Heron, *Table and tradition: towards an ecumenical understanding of the eucharist*. - Edinburgh: Hansel, 1983, pp. 80-107.

(among other things⁷) there be a physical element, such as water, wine or oil.⁸ Yet such a definition did not encompass all seven of what were then generally accepted as sacraments.⁹ The primary authority for a sacrament was its institution by Jesus himself. But church practice and tradition also contributed authority. By omitting reference to a physical element, Peter Lombard was later able to bring practice and theory into line. A sacrament could be an action, such as the laying on of hands. This understanding was to remain virtually unchallenged until the reformation.¹⁰

The efficacy of the sacraments to perform the works of God's grace was also important in medieval theology. For Aquinas, there was an aspect of instrumental causality in the sacraments.¹¹ Simply to carry out a sacrament as a sign did not confer grace. One experienced the graces of the sacrament by having the character, and one received the character by undergoing the rite.¹²

The reformers¹³ were concerned to eliminate medieval additions to earlier, simpler, versions of Christian theology.¹⁴ They agreed with medieval catholic theologians that a sacrament is an instituted and authorized sign of grace, but disagreed that church tradition is a basis of authorization. Baptism and the eucharist were recognized as the only true sacraments - both being attested in scripture as instituted by Christ. Baptism and the eucharist were accepted also because they each have an external sign (water and bread and wine).¹⁵

The reformers saw the sacraments as an accommodation to human limitations.¹⁶ Luther and Zwingli agreed on the nature of the sacraments as signs, but disagreed

⁷ He also required that there be a likeness to the thing signified, authorization to signify the thing in question, and an efficacy by which the sacrament is capable of conferring the benefits it signifies.

⁸ McGrath, *Christian theology*, p. 498; see also: D Power, *The eucharistic mystery: revitalising the tradition*. - Dublin: Gill & McMillan, 1992, pp. 212-3.

⁹ Baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination and extreme unction.

¹⁰ McGrath, *Christian theology*, pp. 498-9.

¹¹ Power, *op. cit.*, pp. 230ff.

¹² "Beyond the capacity to signify by use of the proper matter and form, to be causes of grace the sacraments of the New Law have to be endowed in act with a power that gives rise to an effect that is beyond their native power to signify. Aquinas refers to this as *virtus fluens*, operative only in the moment of sacramental action and not attributable to signification as such, even though operative through it. In fact Aquinas never says of sacraments *significando causant*, that is, he does not say that they cause by signifying." [Power, *op. cit.*, p. 233; see also Martos, *op. cit.*, pp.162-4.].

¹³ For a discussion of reformation sacramental theology, see Herron, *op.cit.*, pp. 108-145.

¹⁴ *Reformation thought: an introduction* / Alister McGrath. - 2nd ed. - Blackwell, 1993, p.160.

¹⁵ Thus in the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1562, for example, "sacraments" other than Baptism and the Lord's Supper are excluded "for that they have not any visible sign or ceremony ordained of God." [Article 25]

¹⁶ Thus Philip Melancthon wrote in his *Propositions on the mass* (1521) that, "Signs are the means by which we may be both reminded and reassured of the word of faith." "What some call sacraments, we call signs - or, if you prefer, sacramental signs [*ibid.*, p.162.]

sharply on what was signified and the relationship between the sign and the spiritual thing to which it pointed.¹⁷ Calvin took a middle position, arguing that in the sacraments there is a very close connection between the symbol and the gift symbolized. There is difference between the two, yet the sign really points to and effects the thing signified.¹⁸

Counter-reformation theology concentrated on the efficacy of the sacraments. They came to be seen more as causes than signs of grace. Contemporary Catholic writing, following Vatican II, has rediscovered the nature of the sacraments as "signs of grace, signs of Christ, signs of God's love, signs of life, signs of faith, signs of the church, and signs of spiritual transformation."¹⁹ This has clarified application of the classic phrase *ex opere operato* - it is because it is a *sign* of what is happening that the efficacy of a sacramental ritual can be independent of the holiness of the minister.²⁰

The essential idea of a sacrament as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace"²¹ can be set out fairly simply. But the above sketchy history illustrates that there are subtleties and complexities in the idea of "sacrament" that have been the source of much debate.

II

Baptism and the eucharist are celebrations of the Incarnation, for each points to the coming of the Son of God in the flesh. The outworking of the Incarnation - the word made flesh - is found in the church, the body of Christ. Particularly in Catholic theology, this is also understood sacramentally, with the whole church as sacrament and Christ its head as sacrament.

¹⁷ Luther defined sacraments as, "promises with signs attached to them," [*ibid.*] the function of which is to reassure believers that they are truly members of the body of Christ [*ibid.*, p.164]. Zwingli came to regard the sacraments as (divinely instituted) signs by which we demonstrate our loyalty and commitment as members of the community of faith [*ibid.*, pp.171-2]. For Luther, Christ was really present in the eucharist, but to Zwingli, Christ was really present only the hearts of believers. The two reformers could not agree on the meaning of the words *hoc est corpus meum* ("this is my body") in Matthew 26.26. For Luther (though he rejected transubstantiation), *est* meant 'is' in a fairly literal way; for Zwingli it meant 'signifies' [*ibid.*, p.179].

¹⁸ "Believers ought always to live by this rule: whenever they see symbols appointed by the Lord, to think and be convinced that the truth of the thing signified is surely present there. For why should the Lord put in your hand the symbol of his body, unless it was to assure you that you really participate in it? And if it is true that a visible sign is given to us to seal the gift of an invisible thing, when we have received the symbol of the body, let us rest assured that the body itself is also given to us [Calvin, quoted, *ibid.*, p.182].

¹⁹ Martos, *op. cit.*, p. 110.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Catechism within the Church of England's *Book of Common Prayer* of 1662.

In the 1950s and 60s Edward Schillebeeckx wrote of the sacraments as signs revealing the transcendent, divine reality. Jesus himself was a sacramental sign to those who knew him in Palestine, for he revealed to them the mystery of God. After his death, Jesus remained a sacrament to those who believed him.

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.²²

Redeemed by Christ, the Christian community is a sacrament to others. And in the church sacraments, the Christian community recognizes the presence of the redemptive mystery.

Here the first and most fundamental definition of sacramentality is made evident. In an earthly embodiment which we can see and touch, the heavenly Christ sacramentalizes both his continual intercession for us and his active gift of grace. Therefore the sacraments are the visible realization on earth of Christ's mystery of saving worship.²³

Karl Rahner spoke similarly of Christ and the church as sacramental signs:

... Jesus Christ is called the primordial sacrament of salvation. By this word we mean precisely that historical event in which, as in an historical sign, God's will to save men (*sic*) ... brings about its own unmistakable historical manifestation and establishes itself in the world and not just in the transcendent will of God. The church, as the socially constituted presence of Christ in every age up to the end, can therefore rightly be called the basic sacrament of the salvation of mankind. By this we mean that it is the sign which perpetuates Christ presence in the world ...²⁴

Rahner accepted that there is no historical evidence that Jesus instituted all of the traditional sacraments. For him it is sufficient to show that Christ instituted a sacramental church. The church itself continues to be a sacrament and is itself a sign of Christ. Through a sacramental church, Christ can be said to have instituted everything that the sacraments signify and make available.²⁵

The sacraments (baptism and the eucharist) are grounded in Christ's earthly ministry - in his being incarnate. The Incarnation is in turn sacramental (some would say *the* sacrament), for it is a physical sign of God's redemptive grace.

III

²² Edmund Schillebeeckx, *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God*. - New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963, p. 15 (emphasis original).

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 45. Schillebeeckx's understanding of the sacraments was influential in encouraging liturgical changes of Vatican II. If the sacraments were to be effective signs of encounter with Christ, this had to be made possible in liturgy.

²⁴ Karl Rahner, *Meditations on the sacraments*. - London: Burns & Oates, 1977, p. xv.

²⁵ Martos, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

Scripture suggests²⁶ that Christ's redemptive work of reconciliation is directed towards all of creation. There is much in scripture that speaks of the creation as a *sign* of God's actions in grace and power.²⁷ God's creation is a sign and expression of relationship with the people of God and humankind as a whole.

Therefore it is not surprising that some theologians speak of the whole creation as sacramental. Calvin, in his *Institutes*,²⁸ placed the Christian sacraments on the broader basis of nature, recognizing that God can use one of God's created elements sacramentally - for example the rainbow given to Noah and his posterity as a sign of the continuing mercy of God.²⁹ William Temple wrote of a "sacramental universe", in which all of material existence is essentially holy, a medium of revelation and a means of grace. The creation is the sacramental expression of the creator.³⁰ Similarly, Presbyterian scholar Donald Baillie wrote:

The sacraments in the specific sense are but concentrations of something very much more widespread, so that nothing could be in the special sense a sacrament unless everything was in a basic and general sense sacramental. ... Is there not a basic reason why material things should be taken by the Word and consecrated the instruments of divine grace? Do they not lend themselves to such a use because God made them, because they are His creatures?³¹

On the other hand, Karl Barth, though affirming baptism and the eucharist, is skeptical of a generalised sacramentality.

And was it a wise action on the part of the church when it ceased to recognise in the incarnation ... the one and only sacrament, fulfilled once and for all, by whose actuality it lives as the one form of the one body of its Head, as the earthly-historical form of the existence of Jesus Christ in the time between His ascension and return?³²

This stands against any expression through the sacraments of God's role in creation - though Barth himself places great emphasis on God as the creator. Though he describes the Incarnation as potentially the "one and only" sacrament, Barth seems not to take this to be an extension of a general sacramental understanding of God's involvement in the created universe.

²⁶ *E.g.*: "... through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the blood of his cross". Colossians 1.20 NRSV.

²⁷ Amos 4:13 and 5:18; Jeremiah 27:5 and 31:35-37; Isaiah 40:4-5; Psalm 8:1,3-7; 19:1-2 and 24:1-2; Proverbs 8:1,22,24-31

²⁸ Book IV, xiv, 18.

²⁹ Donald M. Baillie, *The Theology of the sacraments and other papers*. - London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p. 5.

³⁰ William Temple, *Man, nature and God*. - London: Macmillan, 1934, pp. 482-495.

³¹ *The Theology of the sacraments and other papers* / Donald M. Baillie. - London: Faber and Faber, 1957, pp. 2-3.

³² *Church dogmatics: vol. IV, The Doctrine of reconciliation - part 2.* / Karl Barth. - Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1958, p. 55.

In *Between sacraments and Orthodoxy*³³, Alexander Schmemmann speaks of the sacramental nature of life itself. God created and blessed the world by filling all that exists with divine love and goodness. There can be no ultimate sacred-secular split. In response, for example, we recognize that sharing food is a natural sacrament of family and friendship that is more than simply eating and drinking. Greek Orthodox Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholemew said in 1997,

... everything that lives and breathes is sacred and beautiful in the eyes of God. The whole world is a sacrament. The entire created cosmos is a burning bush of God's uncreated energies. And humankind stands as a priest before the altar of creation, as microcosm and mediator. ... All things are sacramental when seen in the light of God.³⁴

James Nash argues from the point of view of "ecological theology" that to restrict the sources of faith and theology to scripture and tradition alone is a denial of God's presence and present revelation.³⁵ He describes the experience of God known and revealed in the natural realm as "sacramental" and identifies characteristics of Christian "nature sacramentality."³⁶ "The sacramental presence of the Spirit", Nash says, "endows all of creation with a sacred value and dignity."³⁷ Nash suggests six affirmations of Christian faith with ecological implications,³⁸ among which is an affirmation of the sacramental presence of the Spirit in the created order.

IV

We can see, then, that an incarnational understanding of the idea of sacrament can be aligned with a sacramental understanding of creation. The manifestation of Christ in the flesh is the supreme instance of God's self-revelation in creation. Each is sacramental in the sense of being a material sign of God's redemptive grace.

³³ New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. Here I rely on the summary in Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed, *The Sacraments in religious education and liturgy*. - Birmingham, Al.: Religious Education Pr., 1985, pp. 13-14.

³⁴ Bartholemew, *Homily of His All Holiness Bartholemew, Ecumenical Patriarch of Constantinople at the 50th anniversary dedication of the Saint Barbara Greek Orthodox Church, Santa Barbara, California, 8 November, 1997* URL: http://ww2.goarch.org/patriarchate/us-visit/speeches/Homily_at_50th_Annivers.htm

³⁵ James A. Nash, *Loving nature: ecological integrity and Christian responsibility*. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, p. 112.

³⁶ "Sacramental experiences of God in nature are morally and spirituality regenerative. This sacramentality is not romantic or sentimental. In nature it observes new life and violent death. Christian faith does not *desacralize* nature. But Christian sacramentality does *dedivinise* nature. The biophysical world is *not* part of God. Christian sacramentality is not pantheistic, but rather panentheistic, in the sense that God is *in all* and all is in God without being part of God. Nature sacramentality is *sensate*. It experiences God in and through the biophysical world, not by blocking the senses or attempting to transcend them." - *Ibid.*, pp. 114-116

³⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 114-5.

³⁸ The six affirmations are: the doctrine of creation; the doctrine of the incarnation; the affirmation that humans are called to exercise dominion; the hope for cosmic redemption; the love of God; and the sacramental presence of the Spirit in creation. [*Theological Foundations for Ecological Responsibilities* / James A. Nash. - 1997. URL: <http://www.umc-gbcs.org/nash.htm>].

A sacramental understanding of creation requires an element of materiality - it is the material universe through which God is seen and known. An understanding of sacrament that removes the physical element can bring about a dualism between God and God's creation. Because creation and incarnation both involve God's self-commitment to the material realm, their shared sacramentality can be addressed in similar language.

According to Orthodox scholar Anetsis Keselopoulos, the early Fathers taught that there is a total integration of the material and the spiritual. The Incarnation takes place today in the Eucharist,

which embodies the intimate involvement of man within the act of salvation, as Christ renews, regenerates and resurrects the whole of creation. When this sacramental involvement of man with the rest of creation is removed, he deprives himself of the essential quality of his human nature.³⁹

Jürgen Moltmann argues that a trinitarian doctrine of creation begins with God creating the world and at the same time entering into it. The creation lives by God's power, and yet God lives in it and is seen through it. If the Creator were to stand over against the creation, God would stand against God's own self.⁴⁰ Rosemary Radford Ruether describes the whole cosmic community of nature as alive, grounded in and embodying the divine Spirit who is its source of life and renewal of life.⁴¹ The whole cosmos is God's body.⁴² Catholic writers such as Matthew Fox and Thomas Berry have particularly contributed to an idea of the sacramentality of the cosmos.⁴³

We can see and appreciate a harmony between an ecological theology and a sacramental understanding of the Incarnation and of God's participation in creation. However, if we too strongly or inappropriately regard church sacraments as the actuality or representation of the presence of God (the "Real Presence") we may risk taking God out of the creation. In the sacraments, many would say that God, or at least the grace of God, is made available to us in a unique way. From this one might implicitly (but wrongly) diminish God's commitment to the whole of the created

³⁹ Keselopoulos, Anetsis, "An Orthodox approach to the ecological question", *Alive in Christ*, 1996(3), Winter 1996. URL: <http://www.stots.edu/kesel.html>

⁴⁰ Jürgen Moltmann, *God in creation: a new theology of creation and the Spirit of God*. - Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993, pp. 14-15, 63-64, 98-100.

⁴¹ Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Gaia and God: an ecofeminist theology of Earth-healing*. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1992, pp. 229-237.

⁴² Rosemary Radford Ruether, *Ecofeminism and healing ourselves, healing the earth*. - [Lecture at] St. Stephen's College, Edmonton, Alberta 2 June, 1998. URL: <http://www.ualberta.ca/ST.STEPHENS/ss-rueth.htm>

⁴³ See Matthew Fox, *The coming of the cosmic Christ*. - HarperSanFrancisco, 1988; Thomas Berry, *The dream of the Earth*. - San Francisco: Sierra Club Books, 1988; and Brian Swimme and Thomas Berry, *The universe story*. - San Francisco: Harper, 1992.

order.⁴⁴ Teilhard de Chardin is among those who have sought to bring the creation story into Christian spirituality by using the metaphor of bread and wine as an embodiment of the entire universe.^{45,46} James Nash, on the other hand, dislikes the idea of the eucharistic elements as symbols of nature.

The wine and bread are the products of culture, signifying the gifts of labor in the human transformation of nature. This is a critical rite for the church, but nature sacramentality values nature in the raw.⁴⁷

An understanding of God as creator is thus a challenge to liturgical reform of sacramental rites. Browning and Reed speak of a "movement *from* seeing the sacraments as religious rites through which God breaks into our otherwise secular lives *to* receiving the sacraments as profound symbols of God's living presence in all of life."⁴⁸

V

A sacrament is a sign to us of God's grace. The church has accepted some rites to be especially God-ordained as "sacraments", though the number of these rites is

⁴⁴ Such concern has been articulated explicitly by the Society of Friends (the Quakers). In its response to the World Council of Churches document *Baptism, eucharist, and ministry* [Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1982 (Faith and Order paper: no. 111)], the Dutch Yearly Meeting of Friends (Quakers) wrote that:

... the word of God does not only refer to personal inner renewal, but also to a new earth. The signs of peace and justice are signs of salvation that cannot be reduced to sacramental-ritual forms. ... Communion [in God's spirit] is not reserved to such places or instances as the table and the meeting. On the contrary, Quakers hold that (daily) life as a whole should be steeped in this experience of communion with God and fellow human beings [*Churches respond to BEM: official responses to the "Baptism, eucharist and ministry text" / edited by Max Thurian. - Volume IV. - Geneva : World Council of Churches, 1987. (Faith and Order paper: no. 137), p.211.*]

Similarly, the London Yearly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends in Great Britain wrote,

... We fear that separating a particular sacrament and making it a focal point in worship can obscure the sacramental validity of the rest of creation and human life. [Baryl Ingram. - "Eco-justice liturgics" in *Theology for Earth community: a field guide / edited by Dieter T. Hessel. - Maryknoll: Orbis, 1996, pp250-259, at p. 252.*

⁴⁵ Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and evolution*. - London: Collins, 1971, pp. 73-4.

⁴⁶ Contemporary liturgical theologian Hoyt Hickman believes that the way to teach an eco-theology through liturgy is to re-educate worshipers about the meaning of the sacraments. Baptism includes a signification of everything that water is - enough means life, too much means death. Clean water on the Earth today is scarce. As we are cleansed in baptism, so might we go forth to cleanse the water of the Earth (*cf.* Rev.22.1). Similarly, "whatever the Lord's Supper is, it is everything that eating is". As we eat and drink, we have cause to evaluate what and how we feed ourselves and the environmental implications. [Ideas of Hickman described by Ingram, *op.cit.*, pp. 257-8.].

Joseph Tetlow finds the reshaping of natural things into the Christ-revealing eucharistic elements to be an expression of the unity of creation and redemption. "The sacramental promise of eternal life reminds us that when we receive Communion we are eating bread, fruit of the earth and work of human hands, now most intimately bound to the body, blood, soul, and divinity of the Son of God. Here lies the most fundamental revealed truth that gives shape to an ecological spirituality today. All the earth shall be made new and brought to fulfilment through Christ. [Joseph A. Tetlow "An ecological spirituality" in *Peace with God the creator, peace with all creation*. - Washington, DC: United States Catholic Conference, 1995. URL: <http://www.nccbuscc.org/sdwp/ejp/articles/spirituality.htm>].

⁴⁷ Nash, *Loving nature*, n. 61, p. 232.

⁴⁸ Browning and Reed, *op. cit.*, p. 11.

argued. Many believe that sacraments are instrumental in affecting the grace they signify; others regard sacraments as simply commemorative.

There is widely held but not universal acceptance of the creation as sacramental, signifying God's presence and redemptive grace. The incarnation of Jesus Christ is the supreme sacrament and self-revelation of God in the material realm.

We need to take care lest enthusiasm for the sacramentality of the whole of creation allows us to devalue the special roles of the sacraments (baptism and the eucharist). On the other hand, if we see these sacraments as symbols of the whole created order, we may burden them with meaning they are not intended to bear.

It is in Jesus that we see the idea of sacrament supremely demonstrated. In him the sacraments have their meaning. He was incarnate as the Word made flesh. Creation testifies of his redemptive work and in him the whole of creation will be redeemed.

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