

*A discussion of Augustine's maxim description of a sacrament as a "sign of a sacred thing,"<sup>1</sup>*

by Brian McKinlay

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"When I use a word", Humpty Dumpty said in a rather scornful tone,  
"it means just what I choose it to mean - neither more nor less."

*Lewis Carroll<sup>2</sup>*

[T]he term "sacrament" is notoriously difficult to define ..."

*Alister McGrath<sup>3</sup>*

## I

The statement, "A sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing," performs a number of functions. It is first a definition - it declares that a sacrament is that which is a sign of a sacred thing. Secondly, the statement is an observation - it observes that there are a number of phenomena which are "signs of sacred things", and groups them into a named category, "sacraments". Thirdly, it is by implication a statement of significance - it asserts that the distinction of certain phenomena as "sacraments" (however understood) is of some significance.

We could gather together the things considered to be sacraments, seeking an acceptable definition to fit them all - this was the approach adopted by the medieval church, and reflected in Catholic tradition since (though Catholic scholarship incorporates wider perspectives). Alternatively, we could establish a definition of what a sacrament is, and then decide which phenomena (if any) match such a definition. This is nearer to the approach adopted by the reformers and the Protestant denominations. Thirdly, we could consider whether sacraments exist at all as a separate category, before considering any attributes they may have. Such an approach leads to a general consideration of the nature of sacramentality.

This essay begins by briefly placing Augustine's definition into its historical context and notes some of the subsequent criticisms and developments in the light of the first two approaches just mentioned. It will be seen that Augustine's concept endures, though as a definition it is imprecise in the light of what the church has come to understand as "the sacraments". The

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine of Hippo. *Letters* 138, 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Through the Looking-Glass* / Lewis Carroll (1872), ch.6.

<sup>3</sup> *Christian theology: an introduction* / Alister E. McGrath. - 2nd ed. - Oxford: Blackwell, 1997, p.494.

essay then adopts Augustine's phrase as the summation of a broader consideration of sacramentality and sacraments.

## II

The Latin term *sacramentum* was used by Tertullian to translate the Greek word μυστηριον - a matter which would be a secret but for revelation (Mat.3.11; Ro.11.25; Col.1.26 and elsewhere), a concealed power or principle (2 Th.2.7) or hidden meaning of a symbol (Re.1.20; 17.7). Tertullian used the word "sacrament" in two distinct senses - in the singular, referring to the "mystery" of salvation spoken of in the New Testament, and in the plural, to refer to the symbols or rites associated with this salvation in the life of the church.<sup>4</sup> 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.<sup>5</sup> Some discussion of what came to be called sacraments is found in the *Didache* and in the works of Iraneus. Clement of Alexandria spoke of Christian rites as sacred mysteries.<sup>6</sup> But it was in the church in North Africa in the third and fourth centuries that we find the first definitions of a sacrament.

The African church (under Cyprian, for example) emphasized solidarity in the face of persecution. The sacraments were a means of strengthening the unity of the faithful. Perhaps this is the reason for the development in North Africa of sacramental theology.<sup>7</sup> In was in the midst of the Donatist controversy, a consequence of the persecutions endured there, that Augustine developed his understanding of the sacraments.<sup>8</sup>

Augustine used various definitions to explain his idea that a sacrament required a relationship between a sign or symbol<sup>9</sup> and the thing signified. For Augustine, there are many signs pointing to different realities - as smoke is a sign of fire or words are a sign of that to which they refer. Famous among

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<sup>4</sup> *Christian theology* ... p.496; see also *Doors to the sacred: a historical introduction to the sacraments of the Catholic Church* / Joseph Martos. - Rev. ed. - Liguori: Triumph, 1991, p. 29.

<sup>5</sup> *Christian theology* ... p.496-7.

<sup>6</sup> *Doors to the sacred*... p. 28.

<sup>7</sup> *Christian theology*... p.495.

<sup>8</sup> See *Doors to the sacred* ... pp.40ff.

<sup>9</sup> 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), C20th scholarship has made such a distinction. See *The Sacraments in religious education and liturgy* / Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed. - Birmingham, Al.: Religious Education Pr., 1985, pp.74ff.

Augustine's expressions is his description of sacraments as "visible forms of invisible grace".<sup>10</sup> The definition we are discussing ("A sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing.") is similar. There are two principles to Augustine's understanding. Firstly, a sacrament is a sign. "Signs, when applied to divine things, are called sacraments." Secondly, the sign must be related to the thing signified. "If sacraments did not bear some resemblance to the things of which they are the sacraments, they would not be sacraments at all."<sup>11</sup> This definition seems imprecise. Is every "sign of a sacred thing" to be regarded as a sacrament?

There was further clarification during the Middle Ages. Hugo of St. Victor (1140) defined a sacrament thus.

A sacrament is the corporeal or material element set before the senses without, representing by similitude and signifying by institution and containing by sanctification some invisible and spiritual grace. ... For every sacrament ought to have a kind of similitude to the thing itself of which it is the sacrament, according to which it is capable of representing the same thing; every sacrament ought to have also institution through which it is ordered to signify this thing and finally sanctification through which it contains that thing and is efficacious conferring the sign of those about to be sanctified.<sup>12</sup>

Thus Hugo required there to be (1) a physical element - such as water, wine or oil; (2) a likeness to the thing signified; (3) authorization to signify the thing in question; and (4) an efficacy, by which the sacrament is capable of conferring the benefits it signifies.<sup>13</sup>

Yet this definition remained inadequate for the church, as it did not encompass all seven of what were by then generally accepted as sacraments - baptism, confirmation, eucharist, penance, marriage, ordination and extreme unction. By omitting reference to a physical element, Peter Lombard was able to bring practice and theory into line. A sacrament was indeed a "sign of a sacred thing", but the sign could, for example, be a sacramental act, such as laying on of hands. Peter Lombard's understanding was to remain virtually unchallenged until the reformation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> *Christian theology* ... p.496.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p.497.

<sup>12</sup> On the sacraments of the Christian faith / Hugo of St. Victor, I, 9 quoted in *Documents of Christian worship: descriptive and interpretive sources* / James F. White. - T & T Clark, 1992, p.121.

<sup>13</sup> *Christian theology* ... p.498 see also *The eucharistic mystery: revitalising the tradition* / D Power. - Dublin: Gill; & McMillan, 1992, p.212-3.

<sup>14</sup> *Christian theology* ... pp.498-9; see also Power, *op.cit.*, pp.213-4.

These definitions indicate aspects of the relationship between the "sign" and the "sacred thing" signified. The primary "authorization" was institution by Jesus himself (as in the eucharist). But church practice and tradition also contributed authority. The efficacy of the sacraments actually to perform the works of God's grace was also important in medieval theology. In the thought of Thomas Aquinas, for example, there is an aspect of instrumental causality in the carrying out of the sacraments.<sup>15</sup> In the sacraments, Christ confers grace through the instruments of priest and sign. The efficacy of his passion is at work. Though signification and causality are closely related, they are not identical. Within Thomistic thought, the mere act of signifying does not confer grace.

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.<sup>16</sup>

Thomas observed an ambiguity in Augustine's use of the word *sacrament*. It could refer to the sacramental rite or it could refer to the character or primary spiritual effect of the rite. To Aquinas, one experienced the graces of the sacrament as a result of having the character, and one received the character by undergoing the rite. Thus the baptismal rite, for example, produced in the soul of the recipient a spiritual reality that was a "seal" or image of Christ (the sacramental character). Inherent in this character was the power, if exercised, to cooperate in God's works of grace in justification, sanctification, and the holy life.<sup>17</sup>

The reformers were concerned to eliminate medieval additions to earlier, simpler, versions of Christian theology, including the sacraments.<sup>18</sup> They challenged the nature and number of the sacraments, but the understanding of a sacrament as requiring a sign remained. The reformers saw the sacraments as an accommodation to human limitations. Ideally, we should be able to trust in God on the basis of the word alone. Thus Philip Melanchthon wrote in his

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<sup>15</sup> Power, *op. cit.*, pp.230ff.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p.233.

<sup>17</sup> *Doors to the sacred ...* pp.162-4.

<sup>18</sup> *Reformation thought: an introduction* / Alister McGrath. - 2nd ed. - Blackwell, 1993, p.160.

*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."<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, Luther defined sacraments as, "promises with signs attached to them,"<sup>20</sup> the function of which is to reassure believers that they are truly members of the body of Christ.<sup>21</sup> 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.<sup>22</sup> There was agreement as to the nature of the sacraments as signs. But there were strong differences as to what was signified and the relationship between the sign and the spiritual gift ("sacred thing", in Augustine's phrase) to which it pointed.

These differences stood out in debate about the relationship between the body and blood of Christ and the bread and wine of the eucharist. For Luther, Christ was really present in the eucharist. For Zwingli, he 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"<sup>23</sup>) in Matthew 26.26. For Luther (though he rejected transubstantiation), *est* meant 'is' in a fairly literal way; for Zwingli it meant 'signifies'.<sup>24</sup>

Aware of the differences between Luther, Zwingli and others, Calvin took a middle position. He argued that in the sacraments there is a very close connection between the symbol and the gift symbolized. The sign is visible and physical, but the thing signified is being visible and spiritual. Yet, because the connection between the two is intimate, one may be applied to the other. The sign effects the thing signified.

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.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p.162.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, p.164.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.171-2.

<sup>23</sup> "τούτου ἐστὶν τὸ σῶμα μου" (Gk.)

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 179.

<sup>25</sup> Calvin, quoted *ibid.*, p.182.

Calvin thus maintained a difference between sign and thing signified. Yet the sign really points to the gift it signifies.

But not every sign indicates a sacrament. The reformers agreed with medieval catholic theologians that a sacrament is an instituted and authorized sign of grace. But there was disagreement on the basis of authorization. Baptism and eucharist were recognized by the reformers as the only true sacraments - both being attested in the scriptures as instituted by Christ. Baptism and the eucharist were accepted also because they each have an external sign (water and bread and wine). Thus in the Thirty-Nine Articles, 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."<sup>26</sup>

Augustine's essential concept of a sacrament as a "sign of a sacred thing" stood the test of time. But it was refined by attempts to understand the nature of the sign and its relationship with the thing signified. The idea of a sacrament as "sign of a sacred thing" has also been supplemented by varying ideas of what must exist in a sacrament.

### III

Catholic theology had long spoken of the sacraments as signs and the reformers did not challenge this doctrine. Consequently it was not a focus of the Council of Trent. Rather, counter-reformation theology emphasized the efficacy of the sacraments. They came to be seen more as causes than signs of grace. But 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."<sup>27</sup> Martos observes that an understanding of the sacraments as signs has enabled clarification of the idea behind 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.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> *Articles agreed upon by the Archbishops and Bishops of both provinces and the whole clergy in the Convocation holden at London in the year 1562 for the avoiding of diversities of opinions and for the establishing of consent touching true religion*, Article 25

<sup>27</sup> *Doors to the sacred ...* p.110.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

In the 1950s and 60s Edward Schillebeeckx wrote of the sacraments as signs that reveal the transcendent, divine reality. Jesus himself was a sacramental sign to those who knew him in Palestine. He revealed to them the mystery of God. After his death, he 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 be in his humanity the only way to the actuality of redemption.<sup>29</sup>

In turn 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.<sup>30</sup>

"Thus Schillebeeckx traces the seven traditional sacraments to the church, which is the sacrament of Christ, and to Christ himself, who is the sacrament of God."<sup>31</sup> When fruitful, the sacraments communicate God's grace and change people's lives. Yet even when unfruitful they remain valid signs of Christ. 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.<sup>32</sup>

Karl Rahner speaks 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 ...<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God* / E. Schillebeeckx. - New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963, p.15.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, p.45.

<sup>31</sup> *Doors to the sacred ...* p.112.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Meditations on the sacraments* / Karl Rahner. - London: Burns & Oates, 1977, p.xv.

Rahner accepts 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.<sup>34</sup>

Recent growth in liturgical theology has been interrelated with developments in understanding of the sacraments. Martos notes "a radical shift away from the traditional understanding of sacraments as metaphysical entities which are communicated (in the traditional terminology, "administered" and "received") to a recipient from God through the instrumentality of a properly performed (or valid) liturgical ceremony."<sup>35</sup> Thus we see the sacraments becoming, as liturgy, an expression and sign of the life of the whole people of God. Our communal life has been sanctified (made sacred) by Christ and sacramental liturgy is a sign of this.

#### IV

At the beginning of this essay, we noted that to define a sacrament as "a sign of a sacred thing" implies that the distinction of certain phenomena as "sacraments" is significant. Yet we have seen that, in some Catholic theology at least, the sacraments in a sense exemplify by the whole church as sacrament and Christ as sacrament.

Scripture suggests (e.g. Colossians 1.20<sup>36</sup>) 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 (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). God's creation is a sign and expression of relationship with the people of God and humankind as a whole. God redeems and restores the creation, including humankind.

Therefore it is not surprising that some theologians speak of the whole creation as sacramental. William Temple wrote of a "sacramental universe" in

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<sup>34</sup> *Doors to the sacred ...* p.115.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p.124.

<sup>36</sup> "... 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

which the whole of material existence can be an effective medium of revelation and a means of grace.<sup>37</sup> Similarly, 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 the divine Word entirely absent from the wider world from which it singles out special elements for a specially sacred use? 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?<sup>38</sup>

Baillie notes that even Calvin, in his *Institutes*,<sup>39</sup> places 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.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in his parables, Jesus used natural objects as symbols of aspects of faith.

In *Between sacraments and Orthodoxy*<sup>41</sup>, Alexander Schmemmann, speaks of the sacramental nature of life. God created and blessed the world by filling all that exists with divine love and goodness. Our response is to bless and thank God and see the world as God sees it. We are by nature priests, standing in the centre of the world, unifying it in acts of blessing God, receiving the world from God and offering it to God. There can be no ultimate sacred-secular split. For instance, we recognize that food is the natural sacrament of family, friendship, and of life that is more than simply eating and drinking. Protestant writer, Max Thurian, also adopts this more universal view, clarifying the relationship between the sacraments and universal sacramentality. He says,

... although it is beyond question that God is acting invisibly and secretly in people and in the world by his providence and his mercy, we know the means of grace through which he acts visibly and explicitly; they are his word and the sacraments of his presence and his working. ... Although the activity of God is universal, far exceeding the reach of his word and sacrament, it is in them that we can be sure of hearing him and meeting him.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> *Nature, man and God* / William Temple. - London: Macmillan, 1934, pp.482-495.

<sup>38</sup> *The Theology of the sacraments and other papers* / Donald M. Baillie. - London: Faber and Faber, 1957, p.42-3.

<sup>39</sup> *Institutes*, Book IV, xiv, 18.

<sup>40</sup> Baillie, *op.cit.*, p.45.

<sup>41</sup> New York: Herder and Herder, 1965. Here I rely on the summary in *The Sacraments in religious education and liturgy* / Robert L. Browning and Roy A. Reed. - Birmingham, Al.: Religious Education Pr., 1985, pp.13-14.

<sup>42</sup> *Our faith: basic Christian belief* / Max Thurian. - Taiz ■: Les Primes de Taiz ■, 1978, pp. 111-2, quoted *ibid.*, p.14.

Browning and Reed characterize these developments 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."<sup>43</sup>

Many have written of the natural world as a place of personal encounter with the greatness and beauty of God in a way that is nonetheless intimate.<sup>44</sup> The current revival of Celtic spirituality focuses on God as known and revealed in the natural realm. James Nash describes these experiences as "sacramental".

This understanding of sacramentality emphatically denies that the Christian faith desacralizes nature. Contrary to a common viewpoint ... nature is sacred by association, as the bearer of the sacred. We are standing perpetually on holy ground because God is present ... The sacramental presence of the Spirit endows all of creation with a sacred value and dignity.<sup>45</sup>

Adapting Augustine's phrase with which we began, we might well say that, "the whole of nature is a sign of a sacred thing", the divinity of God as creator and redeemer. There is room in Augustine's concept for sacraments as signs specifically instituted by Christ and his church. And there is room for an understanding of the whole of God's creation as a sacrament of divine beauty, glory, and goodness.

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<sup>43</sup> *Op. cit.*, p.11.

<sup>44</sup> For example, Paul Collins in *God's Earth: religion as if matter really mattered*. - North Blackburn : Dove Books, 1995.

<sup>45</sup> *Loving nature : ecological integrity and Christian responsibility* / James A. Nash. - Nashville: Abingdon, 1991, pp.114-5

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