

conditions in which it humanly originates and as making the stuff of an entitative habit, it is more spreading and subtle and penetrating than any wedding garment.

Poor Tom's a-cold. He is the symbol of the man out of health, happiness, grace. He is cold not merely in his extremities, but cold, as we say, to his marrow, or worse, to his very heart. He is a man, but deprived of what his being should have. Enlighten and warm him by grace, and he is changed all over.



## SACRAMENT AND SYMBOL

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THE Christian sacrament is at once cause and sign. Each sacrament is a cause which signifies the kind of grace it produces and a sign which causes what it signifies. In the sacrament we have a perfect coincidence of sign and instrument, for in performing the signifying action we are also constructing an instrument used by God to confer grace. Now it is obvious that the causing of grace is something much more mysterious and much more important than its signification, and in the face of a Protestant criticism which denied all efficiency to the sacraments and saw them simply as symbols or memorials of Christ's life, it is not surprising that Catholic apologetics should have emphasized this causal character of the sacraments. The Christian sacrament is a genuine cause of grace, operating not only dispositively or 'morally', but *directly* causing what it signifies.

And yet such an emphasis can defeat its own purpose if it obscures or attempts to by-pass this other function of the sacrament, for the notion of sacramental causality itself becomes unintelligible unless it is seen as a sign-causality; and it is worth remembering that in the sacramental theology of St Augustine and St Thomas it is this conception of the sacrament as a sign which is dominant. 'Sacrament means sacred sign. A sacrament is a sign of a sacred reality.' It is not until he has devoted two questions of his treatise in the *Summa* to an examination of

the sign-character of the sacraments that St Thomas goes on to consider the sacrament as cause. In this article and the following one next month I want to indicate a few of the riches which such a treatment of the sacraments reveals, not only because it leads to a much deeper understanding of the sacraments but also because it includes and illumines all those other meanings which Christian tradition has given to the word 'sacrament'. In so far as it is possible to consider them separately, this article will be concerned with the sign, next month's with the signified.

What is a sign? 'A sign', says St Augustine, 'is a thing which, besides the appearance it imprints on the senses, leads us to a knowledge of something other than itself.' It is a sense thing, a substitute for something else (the signified), adapted to our way of knowing which is a movement from the known to the unknown. The signified may need a substitute either because it is itself absent or because it is beyond the reach of our knowing powers. If the signified is present or if it is known directly, the sign loses all its value, it dissolves in the presence of the signified like a lighted candle in the sunlight. The sacraments of the Old Law, signs of Christ, became obsolete when Christ himself appeared just as the sacraments of the New Law will become obsolete when we are in possession of the vision of God. The sign exists for the sake of the signified, is dependent on it and is measured by it. But although the signified is superior to the sign, the sign has priority according to our present way of knowing; it is the human face of the mystery.

From this it can be seen that there is a close resemblance between sign and effect. Every effect is the sign of its cause, and conversely, every natural sign is in some way the effect of the signified since it is this causal relationship which defines it as a 'natural' sign. The relationship of creation, for example, which all creatures possess as effects of God can also be regarded as a relationship of signification. Creatures are signs (vestiges or images) of the Creator; it is this which makes a 'natural' theology possible and it is in this sense that the whole of creation can be said to be sacramental. The only Being which is not a sign is the uncaused Cause, the uncreated Creator.

But this similarity between sign and effect is not present to the same degree in conventional or 'institutional' signs (the distinction is St Augustine's). These are signs which derive their character

as signs from convention or common usage. Smoke is a natural sign of fire because it is an effect; but the red star or the hammer and sickle are conventional signs of Soviet Russia. It is difficult to find examples of purely conventional signs since they are generally selected as signs for their 'appropriateness', for the connection they have with the signified. Words, those princes of signification as St Augustine called them, are probably the most perfect type of this kind of sign; they have a maximum of signification and a minimum of sense matter so that there is less chance of their becoming entangled with the 'natural'. The characteristic of this kind of sign is that the signification is imposed on something already in existence; it is a subject which has been endowed with signification. And therefore if we have imposed this signification we can never get out of the sign more than we have put into it; but if God has imposed the signification then the content of the sign may be inexhaustible, a mystery in the strict sense, and our minds will need an added strength to discern its meaning. The sacraments are sacraments of faith.

Parallel to this distinction between conventional and natural signs runs another which is roughly equivalent, the distinction between sign and symbol. In a very fine essay published as an appendix to his translation of the opening questions on the sacraments in the *Summa* (*Les Sacrements*, Rev. des Jeunes, Paris 1951), Père Roguet introduces and makes good use of this conception of symbolism, a term which the Council of Trent itself applies to the Eucharist. The distinction must not be pressed too far since the symbol is a kind of sign; but the word has different associations and is a fresher, much less conceptualized term. Roguet compares the distinction to that between a pyramid and its point: the symbol is the pyramid and the extreme point of the pyramid, an abstraction, is the sign. The symbol is that which possesses signification, a concrete being which is at once reality and sign; sign is much more abstract, referring rather to the relationship of signification than to the subject which possesses it. A further precision is added to this distinction by Jung (though one which Roguet would not accept) when he defines the symbol as the best possible way of expressing the unknown signified: the sign is simply a token, a conventional substitute for the signified, but the symbol is genuinely related to the signified and for this reason is much more alive and acts on us much more powerfully.

To which of these classes does the sacrament belong? Is it an institutional or a natural sign? Is it sign or symbol? It is not difficult to see that the sacrament unites and yet transcends all these categories. Each sacrament is an action involving the use of sensible things which have a natural symbolism of their own: washing with water is a natural symbol of cleansing; bread and wine a symbol of nourishment; anointing with oil a symbol of healing and strengthening. Most of the reasons given by St Thomas for the suitability of water as the matter for Baptism, for example, are drawn from its symbolism. Water, he says, referring to the pre-Socratic philosophers, has always been regarded as a life-giving principle, and therefore when used sacramentally it symbolizes that spiritual rebirth which is the essence of Baptism; it is used for washing and therefore symbolizes that spiritual cleansing which is the effect of Baptism; it cools and tempers and therefore symbolizes the cooling of our disordered passions; it is transparent, open to light, and therefore symbolizes the sacrament of faith; finally, it can symbolize both the womb and the tomb so that our entry into the water symbolizes our death with Christ just as our emergence from it symbolizes rebirth to a new life with him (IIIa 66, 3). 'Know ye not', says St Paul, 'that all we who are baptized in Christ are baptized in his death? For we are buried together with him by baptism into death, that as Christ is risen from the dead by the glory of the Father so we also may walk in newness of life.' (Rom. 6, 3.) These symbols may have acquired all sorts of richer meanings in natural religion or depth psychology besides the wider associations they have in Jewish history and Christian tradition. But all these meanings are subordinate to the words pronounced by the minister; it is by means of the words that this natural symbolism is 'formalized' and supernaturalized—'a word is applied to a material element, and you get a sacrament'. Words, as we have seen, are the purest form of institutional sign and therefore the sacrament, although involving a natural symbolism, is primarily institutional, sign rather than symbol. 'Material things by their very nature have a certain aptitude for symbolizing spiritual things; but this aptitude is canalized into a special meaning by divine institution.' (IIIa 64, 2 ad 2.) Washing with water, when it is informed by the sacramental words, is no longer simply a symbol of cleansing but is the very effecting of our justification, our cleansing from original

sin; the appearances of bread and wine, when the words of consecration have been pronounced, no longer merely symbolize nourishment but veil the very substance of our spiritual food, the body and blood of Christ.

The sacrament, then, is at once sign and symbol, both natural and institutional. But although it is primarily an institutional sign it differs from other institutional signs in that the signification has been imposed by God, 'instituted' by Christ, and is discerned by a mind enlightened with faith. And this imposition of signification is not arbitrary since it respects a double appropriateness in the subject: the sacrament is proportioned to the sacred reality which it signifies and also to the condition of the human creature who is using it.

The first of these proportions derives from the analogy between the spiritual and the corporeal, from the fact that there is a genuine likeness between the visible element of the sacrament and the invisible grace it confers. This is the likeness, indicated by St Paul in the first chapter of the epistle to the Romans, which makes it possible for us to rise from a consideration of the visible things we perceive to a knowledge of the invisible things of God. It is because of this likeness that we are able to understand the parables of Jesus: the kingdom of God is 'like' a pearl of great price, like a sower who went forth to sow, like a mustard-seed. And it is this likeness which is explored by St Thomas and extended to a parallel between the life of the spirit and the life of the body (hinted at in the sacrament-medicine theory of Hugh of St Victor) which he uses to show the 'suitability' of there being seven sacraments. It is also because of this likeness that we can come to some knowledge of what the sacraments produce. They bring about what they symbolize. The seven separate signs point to seven different effects of sacramental grace, and the extent and nature of the causality of each sacrament is indicated and controlled by the character of the sign.

The second proportion is between these sign-activities and ourselves. Sacraments are for men. The sacraments are for our use, given to us by an all-wise God who knows and respects the condition of the creatures he has made. For our education, our humility, our exercise; these are the three reasons given by St Thomas for the necessity of the sacraments as a medium of grace. Not a logical or a metaphysical necessity, in no sense a necessity

for God since he can and does give his grace outside the sacraments; but a 'psychological' necessity for us. They are necessary for our education because we are creatures who can only approach the spiritual through the sensible and these symbols are capable of leading us; this is a lesson which it is worthwhile learning for it is being given by God himself. They are necessary for our humility because our dependence on sensible things should be a constant reminder of our fallen condition, a safeguard against pride, against the false angelism of supposing we are capable of a purely spiritual worship. In the state of innocence there was no need of the sacraments, nor will we have any need of them when we perceive God face to face; but as long as this exile lasts we can only perceive his broken shadow through the dark glass of the symbol. They are necessary for our 'exercise' because the strong human instinct to busy-ness and play must also be sanctified and directed to God. In other words, the sacraments give us something to do; if we were left to ourselves this instinct would find some outlet in the devil's mischief. For the sacraments are actions, not things. With the exception of the Eucharist no sacrament exists apart from its being conferred, that is why it can be so misleading to call the sacraments 'vessels' or 'receptacles' of grace. But they are human actions as well as divine actions, acts of the virtue of religion, expressions of our faith and worship—sacraments of faith, sacraments of the Church. We worship God for our own sake, not for his; but since he knows what our needs are better than we do (for sometimes we are ignorant of our deepest needs) the sacraments are given to us so that we may express that worship in the most perfect way. We are active here, co-operating in our own salvation to the fullest extent. For the sacraments, says St Thomas, are the meeting place of God's descent to us and our ascent to him.

This is the profound truth lying behind liturgical worship: that by worshipping God sacramentally we are worshipping him the way he wants to be worshipped because it is the best possible way for us. If we regard the construction of the sign as something without any human relevance, a spiritual cooking recipe where we mix the necessary ingredients to produce the desired result; if we regard the sacrament simply as a cause and not as a living symbol, the action of a person or a community of persons; then it is inevitable that liturgy should degenerate into stereotyped

ritual or a mere observance of rubrics. For the whole of the Church's worship is sacramental, grouped around the central mystery of the Eucharist: the Church who is herself a sacrament, the sacrament of Christ who is the Sacrament of God.



## AUGUSTE VALENSIN

M. M. BLOUNT

**I**N a time as overshadowed as our own by the *angst* of the day and its despair, there has recently been published, among many inspiring Catholic works, one which in a sense is unique, an antidote, it might be termed a counterblast, to anguish. A Paris journal announces its sale up-to-date of sixty thousand copies.

By the late Auguste Valensin, S.J., famous abroad if scarcely known to the general public in this country, by no means the least of the facets of its unique quality is the fact that the book<sup>1</sup> consists of the personal meditations, without 'points' or formalities of any kind, *written* day by day, by someone of obvious holiness and culture, published since his death in 1953.

To those of us nurtured in any degree on the too-usual style of much of earlier French spiritual writing, this may be far from an alluring introduction. In reading *La Joie dans la Foi*, we should indeed find ourselves behind the times—Père Valensin writes what he feels, not what we might expect him to feel, still less what he might have believed us to expect. He is strictly orthodox (witness the double imprimatur given the book), but before the originality and gentle fearlessness of his mind the conventional, or the timid, might falter. To the author, life is far from 'a dream in the night, a fear among fears', but the meditations vary from day to day and have no specific bearing on the subject, it is in the warmth and confidence of the text that the help for the 'anguished' is found.

This childlike, though far from childish, attitude is the more remarkable as being that of a writer whom posterity, it was said,

<sup>1</sup> *La Joie dans la Foi*, par Auguste Valensin. (Aubier, Paris.)