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The Sacramentality of Things

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Abstract

I discuss the recent tendency to extend the concept of sacramentality by applying it to the world or to aspects of it like beauty, e.g. by David Brown in his *God and the Enchantment of Place*. I look at the Church's traditional teaching on sacraments, in terms of signs, words, and effectiveness, making use of J.L.Austin's work on Performative Utterances, and explore how these three features might apply to the extended concept of a sacrament. I argue that we can perceive signs-by-likeness of God in the world, especially in beauty, and that we can often discern the effectiveness of such signs. We lack, however, anything here corresponding to the words of the sacraments of the Church. I conclude, therefore, that the parallel between sacraments in an extended sense and the sacraments of the Church is only partial; nevertheless the extended usage is justifiable, provided that we realize its limitations.

Keywords

Sacrament, Sacramentality, Sign, Likeness, Beauty

It has become common practice in some recent writing in theological aesthetics and elsewhere to refer to the sacramentality of things, or to describe the world as sacramental. My purpose now is to look at a few examples of this wider use of the concept, to compare and contrast it with the narrower usage of traditional sacramental theology, and to raise a number of questions. I shall conclude that the wider use is indeed justifiable, but that it has to face the difficulty that it lacks anything corresponding to the words that accompany the signs in the Church's sacraments, and this contributes to the fact that we find it more difficult to give a clear account of sacramental effectiveness here.

I shall concentrate on work in theological aesthetics, which, of course, extends both to works of art and to the natural world. I do this because there is a still wider extension of the concept which claims that in virtue of the Creation and the Incarnation all human

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life and history, as well as the whole cosmos is sacramental. Such a very wide use of the concept is found in a book by the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemann, *The World as Sacrament*,[1] as well as in some of the work of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin; and in a recent collection of essays on the work of Simone Weil Vance Morgan writes of her conviction of the sacramental character of mathematics.[2] Now when we extend the concept that far we obviously face the common objection that if everything is sacramental then nothing is. That objection may well be answerable, but by confining ourselves to aesthetics we avoid it, because we are limiting ourselves to considering one mode of God's special presence in the world. We still have to face the question, however, of how we identify examples of such a presence.

Some Examples

We can trace back the tendency I am talking about to artists and writers of earlier centuries, who may well not have actually used the term 'sacrament' in this context. Just to give two examples from nineteenth-century poetry, one thinks of Wordsworth's 'Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey . . .':

> And I have felt
> A presence that disturbs me . . .
> A motion and a spirit, that impels
> All thinking things, all objects of all thought,
> And rolls through all things.

Or there is Gerard Manley Hopkins' poem 'God's Grandeur', which begins:

> The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
> It will flame out, like shining from shook foil.

Hopkins' younger Jesuit colleague George Tyrrell referred to the idea that the spiritual can be conveyed through the material as 'the sacramental principle'.[3]

Turning now to recent works in theological aesthetics, I will mention three writers, of whom the first, Michael Mayne, is writing for a popular audience. He thinks that the whole world is sacramental, and tells us 'Not only does God like it [matter] but he clothes himself in it. It is one of his languages.' Hence the starting-point of

[1] Alexander Schmemann, *The World as a Sacrament* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966. See also Philip Sherrard, *The Sacred in Life and Art* (Ipswich: Golgonooza Press, 1990), pp. 22–31.

[2] Vance Morgan, 'Simone Weil and the Divine Poetry of Mathematics', in E. Jane Doering and Eric Springsted (eds.), *The Christian Platonism of Simone Weil* (Notre Dame IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), pp. 95–114, at p. 105.

[3] George Tyrrell, *Lex Orandi* (London: Longmans, Green, and Co., 1903), pp. 1–5.

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spirituality is not a striving after another world, but a 'deepening awareness of the true nature of this world and our place within it.'[4] But this requires attention, especially to the beauty of the world, and a new way of seeing, inspired by the Holy Spirit; he quotes the visionary painter Samuel Palmer (1805–81), who wrote during his early period at Shoreham, 'I must paint the hills so as to give us promise that the country behind them is paradise.'[5]

We find a much more developed version of such a line of thought in David Brown's recent work. In an earlier essay he and Ann Loades wrote that sacred art can act sacramentally 'pointing beyond itself to another order of reality', without constantly needing to be mediated through appeal to Scripture or Church teaching.[6] In his book *God and Enchantment of Place*[7] he goes far beyond this appeal to sacred art: he discusses secular art, especially landscape paintings of different types, as well; and also the natural world, architecture (both generally, and churches, temples, and mosques), places like homes and cities, gardens, and sport. The last of these is discussed in order to make a link with Brown's next book, which will deal with the sacramentality of the human body (a topic discussed in much recent Catholic theology of marriage).

In all the areas I have mentioned Brown thinks that there may be 'the symbolic mediation of the divine in and through the material' (p. 30), for 'God can come sacramentally close to his world and vouchsafe experiences of himself through the material' (p. 88). The fact that God is omnipresent does not mean that His presence can be felt everywhere equally (p. 386). Sometimes too we may be more conscious of His immanence than His transcendence, and vice versa (p. 84).

Brown's aim in his book is to recover 'enchantment' by reinvigorating our wider sense of the sacramental, and thereby recovering large areas of human experience neglected by religion. In his references to enchantment he is of course crossing swords with Max Weber, who said famously that the modern world is disenchanted. By this Weber meant not so much that people are disenchanted as that the world has lost its enchantment – the German term 'Entzauberung' is poorly translated as 'disenchantment', for it means something more like 'losing its magic'. But Brown is also criticizing both Catholicism

[4] Michael Mayne, *This Sunrise of Wonder: Letters for the Journey* (London: Fount, 1995), pp. 69–70. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Prayer*, trans. A.V. Littledale (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1961), Pt. 3, ch. 2, for a contrast between a spirituality dependent on sensible images and concepts, and a 'Platonic' one seeking direct contact with God.

[5] Mayne, p. 152.

[6] David Brown and Ann Loades (eds.), *The Sense of the Sacramental: Movement and Measure in Art and Music, Place and Time* (London: SPCK, 1995), p. 8.

[7] David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

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and Protestantism: the former for narrowing down the concept of sacramentality to the seven defined sacraments, and the latter for giving insufficient attention to sacramentality, in both its narrower and wider senses (unfortunately Orthodoxy does not get much attention, apart from a discussion of icons).

Brown too sees the whole world as sacramental (p. 350), and he regards his enterprise as a kind of natural religion (pp. 8–9,411), or even a new form of natural theology (p. 151). He is starting from the world, rather than from the historical Jesus (p. 410), or, as his earlier remark indicates, from Scripture or Church teaching. 'World' for him includes both nature and culture, i.e. both natural and humanly structured material (p. 25). Writing of the Spanish architect Gaudi and his unfinished masterpiece, the Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, Brown commends him for helping people to find God in park, house, and church alike, 'a truly sacramental vision, with his architecture an extension of nature as God's creation' (p. 312).

Because of this aim, Brown says fairly little about the theology of the sacraments in the narrow sense, though there is an important section in Chapter 1 in which he points out, correctly, that the term 'sacrament' had quite a fluid use in Christianity for several centuries (pp. 25–33), e.g. it is used of a church in the prayer *Locus Iste*, for the dedication of churches. Thus it was not until the twelfth century that Peter Lombard narrowed down the number of sacraments to seven, a teaching which was officially defined in the following century at the Council of Lyons (1274), and later confirmed by the Council of Trent (1546–63) in response to the Protestant Reformers.

Brown points out too that Christianity teaches that human beings are made in God's image, and that it has had a long history of seeing the world as God's 'second book' (p. 33). He does not give any examples of the latter belief, but he could have instanced St Antony of Egypt who according to Evagrius, answered a philosopher who asked him how he could endure his long solitude without the consolation of books, 'My book is the nature of created things, which is present for me to read when I will the words of God';[8] or Hugh of St Victor, who wrote 'the whole sensual world is, as it were, a book written by the finger of God',[9] or John Keble who said in his poem for Septuagesima Sunday in *The Christian Year*:

> The works of God above, below,
> Within us and around,
> Are pages in that book, to show
> How God himself is found.

[8] Quoted in Derwas J. Chitty (ed.), *The Letters of St Antony the Great* (Oxford: SLG Press, 1975), p. ix.

[9] Hugh of St Victor, *Eruditionis Didascalicae* Bk. 7 (Migne, *Patrologia Latina* 176:814B).

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The trouble with this analogy, however, is that it risks eliding the difference between God's words and His other signs. Now one result of Brown's relative neglect of sacramental theology as such is that he says fairly little about one of its constitutive concepts, that of a sign, and about the variety of signs, though he appeals to notions like reflection, representation, and symbolism, e.g. that of light (pp. 33, 124–6, 249, 288). Also, although he appeals to beauty on occasion, e.g. with reference to churches (p. 300), again he says relatively little about this fundamental concept.

I will return later to these omissions. But now I want to go on to my third writer, David Jones, who, like Brown, starts from the world, rather than from Scripture or Church tradition, but who makes more of a link with sacramental theology. Jones (1895–1974) is perhaps best known today for his paintings and his poetry, but he also wrote on issues touching on theology and art (like Eric Gill, with whom he worked for a time). He maintained that any understanding of the sacraments depends on a wider sense of sacramentality, which he thought had been lost to a great extent in the modern world. As he puts it, 'People speak of sacraments with a capital 'S' without seeming to notice that sign and sacrament with a small 's' are everywhere eroded and in some contexts non-existent', because, he thinks, through the growth of technology we tend to take things at their face-value – though he remarks that one cannot remain at this level all the time, for man is a sign-maker by nature. The creative artist's task, he says, is to 'make radiant "particular facts" so that they become intimations of immortality, or . . . of some otherness of some sort.'[10]

Jones does not confine the concept of sacrament to the context of ritual, because that would be a restriction on its applicability. In a crucial essay 'Art and Sacrament', written in 1955,[11] he defines human beings, unlike beasts and angels, as both sign-making and sacramental animals. Now signs must be significant of something, hence of some 'reality' – Jones thinks ultimately of something sacred. Here he is going upwards, as it were, from human making to God; and he is assuming a distinctive religious anthropology. But he is also concerned with the downward movement, from God to the world, and this is more relevant to our present concern, the sacraments. At the end of his essay he quotes Maurice de la Taille, as saying of Christ on Maundy Thursday that 'He placed himself in the order of signs'. Now this divine condescension presupposes an already existent world of signs – or in his parlance again, sacraments with a big 'S' presuppose a world of sacraments with a small 's' (though Jones thinks that the latter world is already reaching out in some way to the sacred).

[10] David Jones, *Epoch and Artist* (London: Faber and Faber, 1973, pp. 13, 16.

[11] Ibid., pp. 143–79; see Rowan Williams, *Grace and Necessity: Reflections on Art and Love* (London: Continuum, 2005), pp. 82–9, for an interesting discussion of the essay.

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Like Brown, Jones is giving us a kind of natural theology, in that he is starting from the world – which is for him a world of signs, especially art and other forms of making. So in a sense he is making sacraments with a large 'S' parasitic on something else: for we will not understand the former unless we already have some grasp of signs and sign-making in general.

Sacraments as Effective Signs

Now let me move on and contrast the wider sense of sacramentality, which I have just explored briefly, with the narrower one found in traditional sacramental theology. In Catholic theology a sacrament is defined as an effective sign, i.e. a sign that not only signifies, but also effects what it signifies, especially by sanctifying. Thus St Thomas Aquinas states that the sacraments are not only liturgically instructive, like a catechism, but that they also 'cause as well as signify' by conveying grace (*On Truth* 27:4). The Thirty-nine Articles of the Church of England convey basically the same idea in defining sacraments not only as 'badges or tokens of our profession', but also

> . . . certain sure witnesses, and effectual signs of grace, and God's good will towards us, by the which he doth work invisibly in us, and doth not only quicken, but also strengthen and confirm our Faith in him. (Art.25)

Calvin expresses many disagreements with the Catholic theology of the sacraments, but he too comes out with the same general account when he defines a sacrament as 'an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us in order to sustain the weakness of our faith . . .'(*Inst*.IV.xiv.1). Although he accuses the Council of Trent of having a magical view of the sacraments in its teaching that they justify and confer grace (*Inst*.IV.xiv.14), he too still uses causal language, in the definition just quoted ('sealing', and 'sustaining'), and later on when he writes of sacraments being effective through the power of the Holy Spirit, of their 'nourishing' faith, and of their being effective is so far as their ministry helps to foster, confirm, and increase the knowledge of Christ in us (*Inst*.IV.xiv.9,12,16). He differs from Trent, he thinks, in emphasizing the need for true faith here, and also, as we shall see, by stressing the role of word in sacrament.

We have, therefore, two things to consider: what is a sign here, and how can it effect something? But because of what Calvin says (though not only because of this), we need to consider a third one, the role here of words, which are united with signs (of course words too are signs of a kind).

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The signs operative in the two central sacraments of Baptism and the Eucharist are obviously the uses of water, oil, bread, and wine. In the case of Penance or Reconciliation the only visible sign is the priest's making the Sign of the Cross over the penitent as he says the words of absolution. Of course this sign is used in many contexts in Catholic and Orthodox sacraments and elsewhere, and it is an example of what is called a 'sacramental' (a category that the Orthodox Churches also extend to icons, which have a liturgical use for them, unlike paintings in Western Churches, both Catholic and Protestant). But it is the words that I want to focus on now, 'I absolve thee from thy sins, in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.' I think that these words are an example of what J.L.Austin called a 'performative utterance', by which he meant a use of language in which we do something with our words as well as saying something, e.g. betting, congratulating, or making a promise. He specifically mentioned the words 'I do', which he thought (incorrectly) were used in the marriage service, so performatives would also include sacramental promises and vows. He also included apologizing, so I think one could also extend the idea to confessing one's sins.[12]

Not all uses of language in the liturgy are performative, of course, but the concept is important because it gives us a way of approach to the second aspect of sacraments, their effectiveness. As both the term and the title of his book (*How to Do Things with Words*) indicate, Austin is concerned with language which performs or effects things.[13]

Of course, other signs besides words can be performative or effective. Writers on sacramental theology commonly give the parallels of kissing or shaking hands. The latter may mark an introduction, a greeting, an agreement, a reconciliation, or the liturgical act of the Kiss of Peace. It is the participants' intention, their words, and context that tell us what the gesture signifies. Of course there can be misunderstandings and what Austin called 'infelicities': Judas' kiss was a betrayal, not a greeting; and, to cite a recent example at Pope John Paul II's funeral in 2005, Prince Charles' shaking of Robert Mugabe's hand was not, as some journalists assumed, a social gaffe or a diplomatic error, occasioned by his being taken by surprise, but a liturgical act.

[12] J.L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971), pp. 5–6, 40, 45–6.

[13] Louis-Marie Chauvet discusses Austin's work briefly in his *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Experience*, trans. P. Madigan and H. Beaumont (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1995), pp. 131–5, and makes use of it later on (pp. 425–9, 435–6), but he is so anxious to reject some aspects of traditional sacramental theology, e.g. its stress on instrumental causality, leading to what he calls 'productionism' (verging on magic), and more generally its 'onto-theology', that he fails to really exploit Austin's thought here. Surely what Chauvet calls 'symbolic efficacy' is a kind of causality?

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Ranging further afield, we can find other examples of signs effecting things. A Roman emperor's gesture of thumbs up or down could seal a gladiator's fate; and traffic can be controlled by a policeman's gestures, by traffic lights, in which different colours indicate what is to be done, or by verbal signs (especially on a motorway).

In appealing to Austin's concept of performative utterances, I have also anticipated the third aspect of sacraments we must examine, that of words. Calvin emphasized the role of words in sacraments in general, because the latter presuppose God's promises and the Church's preaching, and also because they help us to understand what the visible signs mean and give them their power. Thus if I only silently poured water over someone, this would not constitute a baptism but would simply puzzle people (*Inst*. IV.xiv.3–4; of course Catholic theology does not disagree – see Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* 3a.60.6–7, building on St Augustine, on the importance of words here).

The sacraments are not the only religious context in which words and signs accompany each other. In the Hebrew Bible the most common function of miracles is to identify claimed instances of God's speaking. Thus Gideon prays to God 'Give me a sign that it is you who speak to me' after an angel has appeared to him with a message from God, and then sees the food that he has left on a rock suddenly consumed by fire; and later he treats a fleece in a similar way (Judges 6:17, 36–40). Likewise, Hezekiah is promised that the extraordinary movement of the sun will be a sign that God will fulfil His promises (Isa.38:4–8). In the New Testament the most commonly used term for miracle is *semeion* (sign). The Fourth Gospel depicts the Jews as asking Jesus 'What sign will you give us that we should believe in you?' (Jn.6:30), while the Acts of the Apostles describes St Peter as preaching that 'Jesus . . . was a man commended to you by God by the miracles and portents and signs that God worked through him when he was among you'(2:22). In such cases the sign is an extraordinary event. But more ordinary events are sometimes regarded by religious believers as providential signs: when people have to take important decisions about, say, a change of job, and are uncertain about what to do, they may pray that God will give them guidance through events, e.g. through a coincidence or a dream. Of course there is always the danger of self-deception in such cases, hence the need for discernment: we require procedures for identifying something as a divine sign and also for reading it aright. After all, there are often difficulties in identifying and interpreting ordinary human signs. But in the case of God these problems are magnified, because He is bodiless, and so His actions differ from human ones. Moreover, because He is believed to be, as Creator, responsible in some sense for all events, in that He at least permits them, His providential signs must be distinguished somehow from other events, e.g. in terms of their context and purpose.

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Signs like miracles and providences, however, are not regarded as sacramental signs. Calvin distinguishes signs like the rainbow and Gideon's fleece from the sacraments of the Church, whilst allowing nevertheless that the former are cases of a wider use of the term 'sacrament' (*Inst*.IV.xiv.18–19). Now Brown and others are using the term in a wider sense too. So now the question arises of how their use of the term measures up to its narrower use, referring to the Church's sacraments.

Aesthetic Uses

We have found so far that there are three aspects of sacraments to be considered: signs, effectiveness, and words. How does this analysis apply to the aesthetic uses? And are there other things that we should also consider, like beauty or the fallenness of the world?

In the case of the first aspect, we have to reckon with a great variety of things if we are to include the idea of sign in our definition of the wider sacramentality of the world. As St Augustine says, 'God works the sensible and visible things which He wills in order to signify and manifest Himself in them' (*De Trin*. III.iv.10). We have to face also the question of how we read the signs correctly.

The variety of signs includes, besides words and pictures, signs by resemblance or by association, like footprints, and purely conventional ones, e.g. gestures. The first modern philosopher to distinguish between the different kinds of signs, C.S. Peirce (1839–1914), proposed as his main classification a threefold one: likenesses or 'icons', indices (e.g. a barometer), and symbols.[14] This classification cuts across Brown's distinction between natural phenomena and human artefacts: a likeness, for instance, can exist both in nature and in a human creation. Looking more to our present concern, aesthetic signs, in his book *Languages of Art* Nelson Goodman makes a distinction between likenesses and linguistic signs; or rather, in his parlance, between 'resemblances' and 'representations'; he construes the latter category very widely, for it includes maps, models, paintings and so forth, as well as language).[15]

Both Peirce and Goodman list likenesses or resemblances first; and historically this category has been central to the claim that the world is sacramental in some wider sense. Usually that claim is dependent on a doctrine of Creation, and on the belief that agents act or create in accordance with their own nature. Plato, for example, in his creation

[14] Charles Hartshorne and Paul Weiss (eds.), *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*, vol. I (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1960), p. 295, section 558).

[15] Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publ. Co., 1976), pp. 42–3.

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myth in the *Timaeus* says that the Demiurge [Workman or Creator] being free of jealousy, desired that all things should be as like himself as they could be (29E).

Of course, there is also a long tradition which emphasizes God's transcendence, and hence stresses the difference between Him and creation more than the likeness (in a parallel way, there is a tradition which reveals a similar reluctance to use human language of a transcendent God, because of the risk of idolatry, and which insists that human words are inadequate to describe God and that here we are 'thrusting against the limits of language', as Wittgenstein put it, and so we have to resort to metaphor and analogical language). Isaiah, for instance, depicts God as saying, 'For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts' (55:9), and 'To whom will you liken me and make me equal, and compare me that we may be alike?'(46:5; cf.40:18). But there are more Biblical texts that stress the likeness than ones that stress the unlikeness,[16] and this is not surprising, considering the centrality of the beliefs in Creation and the Incarnation, both of which are concerned with God's relationship to the world. Thus we are told that we are created in the image and likeness of God (Gen.1:26–8; 9:6), a daring claim, for, as Aidan Nichols remarks, it gives to human beings the power of divine disclosure which, in a pagan culture, was attached to the image of the god.[17] We are told to imitate God in loving widows, orphans, and strangers (Dt.10:18f.), forgiving offenders and showing mercy (Matt.6:12,14f.; Lk.6:36). I am told by Archbishop Rowan Williams that the word for saint in Old Slavonic is 'like' [sc. God].

In the New Testament an even bolder idea is introduced, that of sharing in the divine nature (II Pet.1:4). But here a new factor has been introduced: Christ is regarded as a middle term between God and the human race. Since he is the image and perfect copy of God (II Cor.4:4; Col.1:15; Heb.1:3), it is by imitating him that we become God-like, and it is by his redemptive work and through the Holy Spirit that whatever likeness to God was lost at the Fall can be restored. Hence it has become common in modern theology to describe Christ as a sacrament. Karl Barth, for instance, says that Christ's humanity is 'the first sacrament' (*Church Dogmatics,* II.i., p. 54), whilst Karl Rahner describes the incarnate Son as being the 'revelatory symbol' of the Father.[18] The latter derives his whole sacramental theology

[16] See my *Spirit, Saints and Immortality* (London: Macmillan, 1984), pp. 65, and 94 n. 6, for a list of some central texts.

[17] Aidan Nichols, *The Art of God Incarnate: Theology and Image in Christian Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 1980), p. 19.

[18] Karl Rahner, 'The Theology of the Symbol', in his *Theological Investigations* vol. 4, trans. K. Smith, (London: Darton, Longman & Todd), pp. 221–52, at p. 239.

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from this position, using the Church as the middle term: for he goes on to say that the Church is the persisting presence of the Incarnate Logos in space and time, and thus the 'primary sacrament', and that particular sacraments make concrete and actual for the life of the individual the reality of the Church.[19] Rahner's approach is typical of much modern Catholic sacramental theology. Edward Schillebeeckx, for example, also proceeds by first defining Christ as the primordial sacrament, and then goes on to describe the seven sacraments as Christ's actions through the Church, whereby the essence of the latter expresses itself.[20] Schillebeeckx also mentions the saints as having a sacramental role, as visible grace present in the world.[21]

The examples I have just given are all ones taken from human life; and in the last case, of how people can become, through the mediation of Christ the image of God, signs-through-likeness of God. But to get back to Mayne, Brown, and Jones, what of the natural world, not to mention human artefacts: how can they be signs-through-likeness?

The most popular traditional answer to this question has been in terms of beauty. Many theologians have described God as beautiful, indeed in a few cases as beauty itself, as have some artists, and I suspect that many ordinary people today would still favour this approach: certainly in the case of natural beauty, and to a lesser extent in that of the arts (of course there are many other reasons for commending works of art or literature besides their beauty). As Hans Urs von Balthasar puts it, 'the cosmos is experienced as the representation and manifestation of the hidden transcendent beauty of God.'[22] He is, in this quotation, writing of Greek thought from Plato to Plotinus; and it is true that early Christian thought was much influenced by the former, especially the famous 'ladder of beauty' in his *Symposium*, where Diotima is depicted as telling Socrates that we should mount from an appreciation of beautiful bodies in the world to more abstract forms of beauty, like beautiful souls or laws, to beauty itself (210–11). But there are many passages in the Bible that have

[19] Ibid., p. 241. See also Rahner's *The Church and the Sacraments,* trans. W.J. O'Hara (London: Burns and Oates, 1963), for a further development of this line of thought.

[20] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963), esp. chs. 1–2. The Second Vatican Council describes the Church as a 'kind of sacrament of intimate union with God and of the unity of mankind' (*Lumen Gentium* 1), 'the visible sacrament of this saving unity' (ibid. 9), and as 'the universal sacrament of salvation' (ibid. 48).

[21] Ibid., pp. 258–62. Cf. Sherrard, p. 28, for the same idea, which is also a favourite theme of von Balthasar. Pursuing the idea, not only are saints like God, but they are produced through the efficacy of God's grace, and may help to bring about the conversion of others. Many theologians also regard holiness as a form of beauty, which I go on to discuss later.

[22] Hans Urs von Balthasar, *The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics, vol. II Studies in Theological Style: Clerical Styles*, trans. A. Louth et al. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1984), p. 154.

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been equally influential, both ones that speak of God's glory, and ones, especially in the Psalms, that ascribe something like beauty to God or to places and things associated with Him.[23]

On the whole this line of thought has not been popular in modern Christian theology. There are, however, a few outstanding exceptions besides von Balthasar: Jonathan Edwards, some of the Russian *émigrés* of the early twentieth century, especially Paul Evdokimov, and above all Simone Weil. The last of these writers describes beauty as 'the attribute of God under which we see him'[24] , as Christ's 'tender smile for us coming through matter'[25] , and even as an incarnation of God, come down to earth to save us.[26] She describes, too, the contact of the true artist with the beauty of the world as being of the nature of a sacrament.[27]

The penultimate quotation echoes Dostoevsky's famous statement in *The Idiot* that beauty will save the world, and it take us on to the second aspect of sacraments, namely effectiveness, providing a very bold answer to an obvious question raised by the parallel made between the sacraments of the Church and the wider sacramentality of things. The former are effective, as we have seen, in so far as they convey grace and sanctify. But how is the 'sacramental world', or particular aspects of it like landscapes or paintings, effective? Or is this a silly question, occasioned by pressing the parallel too far? After all, the sacraments of the Church are actions, like pouring water, which are believed to have specific aims and effects, like freeing from Original Sin, admitting a child into the Church, or forgiving and healing, whereas landscapes, buildings, and so forth are not actions but relatively stable parts of the furniture of the universe.

Writers like Brown, however, have an answer to this obvious question, in terms of mediating God's presence. Thus Brown, as we have seen, writes in general of 'the symbolic mediation of the divine in and through the material' (p. 30), and later tells us, more specifically, 'Buildings can and do communicate a mediated divine presence . . .'(p. 347; cf. p. 367). He writes too of seeing the world and what we do with it as 'an intelligible reflection of a divine mind expressing itself' (p. 288, an idea which he also finds in the Qu'ran

[23] Cf. my *Spirit and Beauty* (2nd edn., London: SCM Press, 2002), pp. 56–60; also pp. 122–8, where I discuss the relationship between earthly and divine beauty, which has traditionally been described in many ways: as resemblance to an exemplar or archetype, as participation or vestige, or, more poetically, in terms of reflections, mirrors, or even jewels refracting God's light.

[24] Simone Weil, *On Science, Necessity and the Love of God*, trans. R. Rees, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1968), p. 129.

[25] Idem, *Waiting on God*, trans. E. Craufurd (London: Fontana, 1959), p. 120.

[26] Idem, *First and Last Notebooks*, trans. R. Rees (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 139.

[27] Idem, *Waiting on God*, p. 124.

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– cf. p. 366). So presumably the signs are effective in so far as they communicate and express things successfully in the ways described. Thus a landscape can teach us things: 'consider the lilies of the field . . . .' Similarly, a work of art can change people: Mendelssohn wrote to Schumann about one of Bach's chorale preludes, 'if life were to deprive you of hope and faith, this one chorale would bring it all back to you.'[28] One might press the point here and argue that it is God who is acting through the things Brown mentions, hence they are effective.

This seems quite a good answer, in principle. But why do so many people misread the signs? As Thomas Traherne wrote in his *Centuries* 'The word is a mirror of Infinit Beauty, yet No Man sees it' (i.31). Of course, if any sign can be misunderstood or misinterpreted, then presumably this includes the sacraments as well: we have seen how those journalists who criticized Prince Charles' shaking hands with Robert Mugabe misunderstood one part of the Mass, the Kiss of Peace. Signs are supposed to tell us things, but to do so they must be perceived and understood. As Mayne indicates, attention is needed; and perhaps training of a sort, in order to 'take part'.

In the case of the sacraments of the Church there is a third factor to be considered, namely words: as we have seen, they accompany actions like pouring water, consecrating bread and wine, and so forth, and thereby they both indicate what is being done and, as performative utterances, are part of the action. They are constitutive of the sacraments, because they are united with the other signs (again see Aquinas, S.T. 3a.60.6–7).

Now what corresponds to words in the case of the wider sacramentality of things? We are left with a serious problem here, for the parallel seems to break down, in that we lack anything corresponding to e.g. the baptismal formulae or the words of the Eucharist (Brown promises us, on p. 10, that he will deal with the sacramentality of words in his next volume). Sometimes we may be able to supply suitable words ourselves. Thus I may look in wonder at the night sky and exclaim with the Psalmist 'The heavens declare the glory of the Lord' (Ps.19:1). Or, in the case of a work of art, the artist might supply the words for us. Thus Brown points out that Samuel Palmer reinforced the message of his drawing *Valley Thick with Corn* with a quotation from Psalm 65 placed on the original mount, 'Thou crownest the year with thy goodness . . . the valleys also shall stand so thick with corn that they shall laugh and sing.'(p. 122). He goes on to quote Palmer's biographer, R.Lister, as writing of another similar work, *Harvest under a Crescent Moon*, 'the golden seas of corn

[28] Albert Schweitzer, *J.S. Bach*, vol. 1, trans. E. Newman (London: A. and C. Black, 1923), p. 245. See my *Images of Redemption* (London: T. & T. Clark, 2003), p. 10, for this and other examples.

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seem sacramental, and the crescent moon holds its darker area of earthshine like a monstrance holding a Host', and remarks tartly that 'such verbal comments are scarcely necessary', for here, he says, 'a sense of sacramental presence infusing the natural world and uniting nature and humanity as one' is obvious (p. 122). This is so, I think, because Palmer is striving for representation in his art, even if of idealized or transient states. It is because he was successful in this that we do not usually need words to explain his paintings. But when we are dealing with some other kinds of signs, like symbols, verbal comments may be necessary, though they play a different role from the words of the Church's sacraments.

Conclusion

In the central parts of this article I have explored the analogy between sacraments in the narrow sense, i.e. the sacraments of the Church, and the wider sense, and found that the analogy holds in some respects and not in others. In both cases we are dealing with signs, though in the case of the sacraments of the Church they are actions, the actions of Christ in time through his Church, accompanied by words, whereas sacraments more widely understood may cover things like buildings and landscapes, if not the whole earth. But then signs do not have to be actions: think again of signposts and inn-signs, and reflect that in ordinary life there is a great variety of things we call signs. Much more seriously, however, is the fact that there is rarely anything corresponding to words in the case of sacraments widely understood, whereas they are a constituent part of the sacraments of the Church. The analogy seems to break down here. There appears to be perhaps a danger of flattening out the concept of sacramentality if we extend it so widely: why use the term here?

Brown points out, quite correctly, that the sacramental theology of the Catholic Church was relatively late in developing, not until well into the second millennium (so too with the Orthodox Church), and that up till then the word 'sacramentum' was used fairly widely. Given this wide use in history, there is no reason why we should not revive it, provided that we realize what we are doing and distinguish it from the theology of the sacraments narrowly understood.

Thus Brown and others realize that they are departing from our usual current understanding of what a sacrament is, but defend it on the grounds that the narrowing of the concept in the Middle Ages was an impoverishment. Now it is worth noting that some mediaeval writers realized what was happening, but welcomed the narrowing down because it led to a greater precision and to an enrichment of theology in terms of its Christological focus. Aquinas, for instance, says (citing Rom.1:20) that God is indeed made known through

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created entities, so the latter signify something sacred, i.e. the divine wisdom and goodness; but such entities do not sanctify us, so the are not sacraments in the sense that he is discussing (S.T. 3a.60.2 ad 1). Likewise, he says that the signs of the Old Law neither contained nor caused grace (S.T. 3a.61.4 ad.2); so they may only properly be called the sacraments of the Old Law in so far as they point to Christ's holiness, which does sanctify us (S.T. 3a.60.2 ad 2). His narrowing down is motivated by his desire to bring out the causal effectiveness of sacraments and to link their sanctifying power to the work of Christ, continuing through the Church.[29] Thus he might well have considered that modern attempts to widen the concept are an attenuation, jettisoning the gains of precision and enrichment. In any case, later generations have inherited the concept as it has developed and been refined, so we cannot simply return to counting anything that mediates the presence of God to human beings as a sacrament.

Some modern theologians, however, have followed Aquinas in emphasizing the Christological and ecclesiological dimensions of the sacraments, but this has not prevented them from also wishing to widen the concept. Thus Schillebeeckx, as we have seen, both draws out the connections between God, Christ, Church, and the seven sacraments, and also mentions other forms of sacramentality, especially fraternal love as a channel of grace, seen above all in the saints.

Hence I think that, after all, we can both honour the development of the traditional sacramental theology of the Church and at the same time welcome modern discussions of the wider sacramentality of things, provided that we realize what we are doing and know what is at stake. The wider usage seems to correspond to the experience of a lot of people, as well as perhaps articulating St Ignatius of Loyola's ideal of finding God in all things. We need also to recall Jones' point that our understanding sacraments in the narrow sense presupposes that we have some wider idea of sacramentality, at least to the extent of knowing what signs are, i.e. how one thing can stand for another by depicting, symbolizing and so on. We need also, I think, to do more to explore the wide variety of types of sign and their roles.

Finally, let me suggest that this topic is of vast metaphysical importance, for it is concerned with God's relationship with the world. There are two important ways in which what is now unknown can be related in the order of being to what is known: first causally, and second through signs and likenesses (whether and how we can come to know these relations is a question of a different order, that of knowledge). The first way includes examples in ordinary living like

[29] See also Denys Turner, *Faith, Reason and the Existence of God* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 224–5. He too wants to widen our use of the term 'sacrament', though not with reference to aesthetics but rather both Creation and the form of our intellects (pp. 116–20).

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an undiagnosed medical condition causing pain, the second includes things like orphans resembling their now unknown parents, or the relationship between a code or a language like Linear B and what it denotes. Now both of these kinds of relation between the known and the unknown apply to God too, and they are combined in the notion of a sacrament, most clearly so in the case of the sacraments of the Church, but also in the case of sacraments in a wider sense, on which I have concentrated in this paper.

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