

SACRAMENTAL AND DEI VERBUM COMMUNICATION

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From the outset, we can here state that the theology of sacraments and the ontology and theology of the symbol are very much linked. That is why, we can here state that a classic place for the theology of the symbol is the Church's teaching on the sacraments. Thus, "the notion of sacrament is very fruitful and important for Ecclesiology. This assertion may also find verification in our present question. A sacrament is a sign which confers grace. It does not only subsequently symbolize the internal event of the sanctifying meeting between God and man by grace. Rather this event takes place under and through this sign."¹ Through sacraments, God communicates his graces to the human person. It is through sacraments that God confers and communicates graces.

The sacraments concretise, actualise, and constitute the symbolic reality of the Church as the primary sacrament. Thus, the sacraments in general are described expressly in theology as sacred signs of the grace of God, that is, as "symbols"² Through these sacred signs, man gets the "sacramental communication of God."³ It is in this context that "the basic axioms of sacramental theology are well known: *Sacramenta efficiunt quod significant et significant quod efficiunt*. If these axioms are taken seriously, they point to that mutually supporting relationship which in our notion of the symbol intervenes between it and what is symbolised."⁴

The importance of the theology of the symbol is also manifested by the fact that in recent times, there has been a multiplication of theologians who are trying to explain the sacraments by basing themselves on the theology of the symbol.⁵

On the contrary, the function of cause and the function of sign in the sacraments are intrinsically connected "by virtue of the nature of things ...], their symbolic character, rightly understood."⁶ A sacrament is the action of God, even if, it takes place through someone who

¹ Karl RAHNER, *Membership of the Church*, in Karl RAHNER, "Theological investigations, Volume 2, London, Darton, Longman and Todd, 1963, 71.

² Karl RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, in Karl RAHNER, "Theological investigations, Volume four, More recent writings," in Karl RAHNER, London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1974, 239.

³ Karl RAHNER, *On the theology of the council*, in Karl RAHNER, "Theological investigations, Volume 5, Later writings," London, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1966, 252.

⁴ RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 240.

⁵ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 240-241.

⁶ RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 240.

acts as a minister. The minister, acts not by his own mandate but acts by divine mandate. The role and action of the minister is assumed and done by the mandate of God. The role of the minister is very important because the minister gives a body to the action of God, which is done for the people of God. The minister makes the action of God present and active⁷ and if we understand sacrament to be the action of God then, “the question no longer arises as to how the sacramental sign ‘works on’ God, and it is no longer possible to ask whether this sign produces grace by ‘physical’ or ‘moral’ causality.”⁸

The sacramental sign must not be seen as being separate from what it signifies. This is the case because the sacrament is seen as the symbolic reality, constituted by God, in order to render Him present through the action of the minister. The sacrament is the “cause of grace *in so far as* it is its ‘sign’ and that the grace-seen as coming from God-is the cause of the sign, bringing it about and so [...] making itself present.”⁹

Mention should be made here of the fact that the sacrament is different from sacramental. The basic difference is that the “sacramental, [...] operates *ex opere operantis (orantis) Ecclesia*, and not *ex opere operato* [...]”¹⁰ We can explain this by saying that the sacrament is the cause of grace but this is the case because the sacrament is the sign of the grace. However, if we say that grace comes from God, then it is the cause of the sign, which is the sacrament. This is the case because the grace of God, not only, brings about the sign but it also makes itself present through the same sign.¹¹

Hence, “the old axioms receive their pregnant sense; *sacramenta gratiam efficiunt, quatenus eam significant*-where this *significatio* is always to be understood in the strict sense as a symbolic reality. So too: *sacramenta significant gratiam, quia eam efficiunt.*”¹² We can explain these two assertions by saying that the grace of God constitutes itself by being active and present in the sacraments. It does so by creating the expression of the sacraments and it creates the historical tangibility of the sacraments in space and time. When the grace of God has created its expression and its historical tangibility through the sacraments, then, the sacraments in turn symbolise the grace of God. After all, self-expression and historical tangibility in space and time are the symbols of God. It is in this sense that grace of God is

⁷ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 242.

⁸ RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 240.

⁹ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 240-241.

¹⁰ Karl RAHNER, *Remarks on the theology of indulgences*, in Karl RAHNER, “Theological investigations, Volume 2: Man in the Church,” New York, Darton, Longman & Todd, 1963, 200.

¹¹ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 240.

¹² RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 242.

symbolised by the sacraments and that even if the sacraments take place within a juridically constituted structure of the Church that does not affect the symbolic reality of the sacraments.¹³

This then leads us to look at the relationship between the Word and the sacrament. Obviously when we are talking of the Word, we are referring to the word of God in the preaching ministry of the Church. If we talk of the word of God in the preaching of the Church, it becomes clear then, that we are also talking of the word of man in as far as it's human beings who are charged with the responsibility of preaching the word of God. It is through their lips that the word of God is preached, and proclaimed through God's divine command. Hence, it is the word of God on the lips of the Church.¹⁴

The Church is the believer and that means that it is not only the proclaimer or communicator of the word of God, but it is also the hearer of the word. The relationship between the Word and the sacrament is characterised by the similarity of these two realities. "This is the real reason for enquiring into the relationship of word and sacrament. They are so like each other that one cannot but ask what is the reason for their similarity and what is the possibility of making a distinction between them in spite of, or indeed because of their similarity and its cause."¹⁵

The power of the sacrament and the power of the word are the fundamental characteristics for the nature and essence of the Church. That is the reason why they are so important for the life of the Church; they constitute the essence of the Church. As such there is a close relationship between them. In the same way, if the nature and essence of the Church is constituted by the power of the word then the question about the relationship between the Word and the sacrament is first paused by ecclesiology itself.¹⁶

It is in this context that one cannot but emphasize the importance of sacramental communication. It is a communication that brings about grace which God confers. Sacramental communication is also very much related to the communication of the word of God. The word of God is usually the context through which sacraments are usually administered. During the administration of the sacraments, there is usually some mention of the word of God, scripturally, traditionally or through revelation in some sense. It could be a scriptural text that is read – it could be a word of God that encourages – it could be some reflection about God in general – it could be a formulated prayer of the Church based on the

¹³ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 242.

¹⁴ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 253.

¹⁵ RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 254.

¹⁶ Cf. RAHNER, *The theology of the symbol*, 253-254.

word of God. This is the general context in which sacraments are administered. It is with this background that we can affirm the close connection between sacramental communication and *Dei verbum* communication. It is also with this background that we can assert the importance of the communication of the word of God in the administration of sacraments.