THE SIGNS OF LIFE

By THEODORE LEONARD

CAN WE REALLY mean it when we say that the sacraments are 'signs of life'? It is a fashionable way of speaking and, although it can be considered as traditional if we go back far enough in Church history, it is somewhat of a novelty compared to the way sacramental theology was taught a few years ago. But a switch in phraseology does not automatically carry with it a change in the real thing. In fact, this rediscovered, renewed sacramental language can bring up more problems than it solves.

One might recall how we used to talk about the sacraments. They were *signs* that *gave* – or *caused* – grace. Now 'grace' is at first sight a notion alien to every-day experience; its correct usage and real importance have to be learned. However deeply its specific reality comes to be experienced, its otherness, as compared to words and happenings of ordinary life, remains. Because of this there is psychologically nothing very intriguing in the statement that grace, a spontaneously alien and peculiar notion for which one must intellectually and spiritually acquire a taste, is transmitted through equally peculiar and alien rites, which bear no resemblance to the behaviour of the christian in his day-to-day life. Further, the giving or causal relationship, in the familiar terms now widely considered as inadequate, established no direct path from the *rites* (the sacraments) to *grace* through the *meaning* of the rites. The sacraments were certainly signs, but the important thing in their relationship to grace was their *causality:* not what they *meant*, but what they *gave*.

It is obvious that in the now more fashionable expression 'grace' has been replaced by 'life'. Instead of a more or less alien technical term, the meaning of which has to be learned and approached through conventional doctrine, we find a familiar word which refers us to something all of us have experienced, inside or outside the realm of the religious option. Everybody will spontaneously have something to say about *life*. But what if the sacraments do not appear to resemble anything recognisable in what we experience as life? This problem is all the more pressing because the distinction between the *meaning* or signification of the sign and their *causality* or giving-power is no longer emphasized. We are invited to read the

meaning 'life' directly in the signs.[1] The new phraseology was perhaps initially designed to convey a better understanding of sacramental practice as it exists today. But it has a fatal boomerang effect and arouses in us, quite logically, a critical attitude: if we are not only to admit intellectually that the sacraments cause grace, but really to experience the fact that they are meaningful signs of life, then we can and should expect their very appearance to be lively and vivacious. Is this really so?

One must admit that it has been the case in certain periods in the history of the Church. If we go back to the 'golden age' of the liturgy, for instance to the times of Bishop Cyril of Jerusalem,[2] we find striking ceremonies which certainly must have thrilled and impressed the candidate to the Church with their vitality. The christian initiation took place on the night before Easter. Satan was renounced in the course of a rotation from the west, the land of night-fall and death, to the east, the land of light and life (people seemed to have felt their orientation at all times in those days). The candidate was then stripped quite naked and rubbed all over with oil, something athletes were always subjected to before the contest. The baptistery was a pool, evoking the tomb-womb symbolism, and the baptizand descended into it, to be immersed three times while confessing his new found faith in Jesus Christ. Emerging from the pool on the other side (baptism is a point of no return), he donned the all-white garment of light and immortality, and, after a few more ceremonies, joined the brethren up above in the church. They all greeted and embraced him, intoned for the first time a common prayer in his presence and invited him to partake in the Lord's supper. The churchmen of those days were splendid showmen, not in any derogatory sense, nor was all this a mere show; but they did succeed in bringing out the *meaning through* the *rites*. These were truly signs because they were genuine, recognizable behaviour patterns, carried out to the fulness of their intent, and fully adapted to contemporary minds.

[1] The word 'sign' now bears the brunt of what was formerly distributed between the notion of *sign* and that of *cause*. In present-day theology, in order to avoid ambiguity, the word 'symbol' is often used to convey the enriched connotations of 'sign' and draw attention to the shift in perspective. When theologians speak of the 'symbolic nature of sacraments', the expression is a rallying-sign for all those who are interested in developing the insight that the way the sacraments *work* is more tied up with their meaning than was previously admitted.

[2] Or of his successor, Bishop John. In our 'golden age' description we have plundered the doubtfully authentic *Instructions on the Sacraments*. It is not the Cyrillic attribution that interests us, but the spirit of the times.

Now what has become of these once unabashed signs of life today? Baptismal water is pre-blessed and pre-greased, then lies stagnating for months with iridescent peacock-eyes of oil floating on the surface. It is expended parsimoniously, splashed on, the essential – so young seminarians are told – being that at least a drop penetrate to the baptizand's scalp. The oils are in a thimble-like container, soaked into a gob of cotton-wool which eventually takes on a suspicious grey from the ministers' thumbs. The anointing resembles the thumb-tack gesture, and the oil is deftly removed as soon as it has touched the anointed. And what has become of the fare at the Lord's supper? Of wine there is a scarcity. And we have of course to explain to children that the white disk looking like a piece of cardboard is actually bread! Instead of the genuine, the full-bodied signs, we have an impression of skimpy, aborted gestures, scared of their own reality.

Perhaps this is inevitable. If the power of these particular signs were once again to be fully developed, we would have to be living in the type of culture prevalent at the time of Bishop Cyril. Indeed, we cannot dream of promoting the power of the traditional life-signs by obliging converts to strip and giving them rub-downs, or by installing pools in our churches. People of the english speaking world would also be terribly embarrassed if their new brethren were to smother them with kisses on the day of their admission to the Church. Even the currently renascent practice of chalice-communion, granted that it is an improvement, does bring up problems of hygiene which the latin legislators may not fully realize; we are germ-conscious, and cannot help it.[1] But if, because of the cultural break, we cannot restore the rites as they were meant to be, why hang on to their skimpy remnants; and more especially, why try to persuade ourselves that these atrophied ideograms have the same meaning for us as did the real thing for christians of the patristic period?

This is not to say the signs have forever lost their power. Perhaps we have been paying too much attention to material *things* in speaking of signs. In steadfast faithfulness to tradition, theologians will point out that the sign is not in the *thing*, but in the *action*, or usage of the thing. The sign in baptism is not water, but the splashing-with or the plunging-into water. Oil is not the sign, but anointing is. Bread and wine are, as sacramental signs, formally oblates –

[1] The example of certain lutheran congregations is interesting; the faithful have individual chalices of their own, which they bring to the Lord's supper.

something offered. During recent centuries, the unfortunate shift of perspective in sacramental theology from the meaning of the sacraments to the isolated consideration of their causality, or giving-power, brought about a certain obsession for the thing which conveyed the causal power. This led to undue scrupulosity about the requirements of mass-wine and unleavened bread, the simultaneity of word-pronouncing and water-pouring at baptism; and we have all heard priests who interminably hiss the words of consecration. Basically, however, the sacramental signs are not things or set words; they are behaviour patterns which do or do not, according to the pattern, require the use of things and do not, except through juridical convention, imply invariable verbal formulae.

Realizing this may help us to understand that, although the power of the things and even of the ritual gestures and words has declined to the point where they need an academic explanation instead of showing their meaning obviously, the sacramental situation in the Church has not been as bad as one of our preceding paragraphs seemed to imply. It is to be remembered that here we are looking, not for the ultimate religious *meaning* of the sacraments (death and resurrection in Christ, possession of the eternal life, gift of the Spirit, divine sonship, etc.), but for the *vitality* of the *signs*. Even if it is difficult to find this vitality in the ritual signs, our quest is not yet over; nor should we be discouraged, for we have pointed out *en route* that the signs are not primarily in the things, but in behaviour patterns, those that inspire the gestures of the Church in her task of witnessing to the message of Jesus and obeying his commandments. These behaviour patterns can be viewed on a more or les comprehenssive level. For instance, in the conferring of baptism, there is more than water, more than just a validly performed ablution; there is a gesture of admission, and a juridical process of affiliation. However important and rich in meaning the water-rite is or may have been, it is nevertheless a certain way of expressing a more fundamental gesture, which is that of the Church receiving a new member.

On the day of baptism, the priest fills in the register with all the information required to establish the status of the newly-baptized as a Catholic. Of that day's events, it is the establishment of such an original which will most surely play a role in the course of a Catholic's existence; for every major religious decision a baptismal certificate will be required. Even though the believer may never quite get the point of being splashed with water, in spite of con-

temporary efforts to resurrect commentaries adapted to the mentality of the ancients, he does realize that having been baptized means that he can get a certificate proving he is a member of the Catholic Church: what most surely remains of the sacrament is the document. This world of dockets and certificates may seem bleak compared to Bishop Cyril's stunning happenings. But is it not rather a mistake to belittle or to ignore the reality and importance of certain very elaborate, meaningful and effective behaviour-patterns in a realm we do not spontaneously consider as sacramental?

And yet, if we are looking for manifestations of vitality (for it is reasonable to think that a sign of life should be in itself something vivacious and lively), while the ritual signs are rather disappointing because they seem to have petered out, there is something striking about the general context in which the sacraments appear and which they perpetuate: the whole legal structure of the Roman Catholic Church. We can look for the vitality of signs in the traditional ceremony a few minutes long; but we can also broaden our outlook and consider the sphere of the legal, the socially organized, the metaphorically political – inasmuch as we do speak of the Church as the city, or *polis*, of God. The religious vitality of a group can be expressed in many different ways according to the spirit of the times and the temperament of the members: in the development of ritual ceremonies in the order of mystery-cults (this would fit the spirit of worship in the times of Bishop Cyril, *mutatis mutandis*), the assertion of 'flower-power', or turning some political entity into 'God's own country'.

The all-pervading structure of law and order is a style peculiar to the Roman Catholic Church, and a magnificent achievement it is. In normal cases it introduces the baptized person into a vast complex of religious organisation that helps him, if he so desires, to find in all dimensions of life, both in time and space, the possibility of a coherent style of christian options and behaviour. The parish, with all its activities, is at his disposition, as are all the Catholic churches in the world, should he be voyaging. The Catholic clergy has been organized and instructed to be at his service, in particular for the further sacramental events of confirmation, marriage, and so on, and throughout his entire life for instruction, guidance and consolation. Affiliation to no other society carries with it the inheritance of such a vast wealth of literature, written on the basis of the bible, in the Catholic tradition, from

Augustine through Aquinas, Ignatius, Theresa, down to the present-day writers deeply concerned with the new problems of witnessing to the faith in the secularized world. The Catholic may also be solicited for money in view of the missions or social-improvement works, and this can be rather distressing at times; but it also means that those works are his own, throughout the world.

Thanks to the perfection of the juridical structure of the Roman Catholic Church and the clearly defined criteria for recognizing what is truly Catholic, we know without hesitation which books, which churches, which forms of worship are ours; and Catholics in many different countries can write for each other's instruction, help each other out spiritually and financially, and collaborate the world over in the same works of peace and goodwill. Here we have a genuine sign of life, that is, a phenomenon, readable in our mortal experience, which does indeed appear to manifest an explosion of vitality. This life of the Church is not of course an end in itself; it is the sign of a higher life, an eternal life. But Jesus meant that we should gradually learn what eternal life we should believe in and hope for, through the sign of Church community life in peace and brotherly love. This is what some modern theologians mean when they say that the Church is the primary sacrament, or the fundamental sign of life. This enables us, in our search for the power of the living signs, to go beyond the exclusive consideration of set rites, and be more attentive to the particular behaviour-patterns which are the genuine expressions of the style of life in the Church at a given period. It is more realistic and convincing to read the vitality of the signs, for instance, in the whole social order to which baptism introduces us, rather than in the truncated ceremonies; or again in the Church's power of calling together every Sunday in peace and brotherhood, millions of men the world over, rather than in the conventional ritualism of the present eucharistic prayer.

And still our work of pointing out the power of the sacramental signs is not yet completed. The very awareness, in modern sacramental theology, of the organic relationship between post-tridentine sacramental practice and the juridical structure of the Roman Catholic Church, however great an achievement this may be, is in a way a sign that a whole period of Church history has come to an end, and that we can now make an inventory and evaluate it, as it were, from an observer's point of view. It may be that our eyes are open to all this because there is a general dissatisfaction, latent or not, that there should be so heavy a reliance on the juridical to assure

the specifically Catholic witness to Jesus Christ. It is hardly necessary to recall that one of the reasons which prompted the patristic and scripture-inspired trends in contemporary sacramental theology was just that sort of dissatisfaction with the prevalent juridical-ritualistic approach. Initially, the new approach advocated no sweeping reforms, but rather, although a few changes were deemed advisable, a reinterpretation of what already existed. However, it dawns on us more and more that if we are to speak as enthusiastically about these things as did the Fathers of the Church, our rites will have to be quite different from what they actually are. Along this line, one of the major experiences of the past few years has been the mass reform.

Since 1963, people have been told and obliged to give up century-long habits: the mass in latin, silent but devout and prayerful participation in the Lord's sacrifice, and so on. Now this does not merely imply the modification of a ceremony; it entails a reorganization of our whole religious behaviour-pattern. The incomprehensibility of latin was not felt as an obstacle, but as a guarantee of the perennial nature of the Church's rites and doctrines; the silence of the canon was not experienced negatively, but rather as a tangible and very effective sign of the depth-dimension in mystery. People are now being told to change, in the name of intelligibility and articulate community self-expression; and it would seem, judging from what has been done up until now, that this was intended to be achieved through mere translation and new habits of community singing or reciting of the ancient, traditional texts. But once the translation was done, it became obvious that the lack of intelligibility has deeper roots than the language question. The texts and the rites themselves were the community self-expression of people who had no idea of the true dimensions of our planet, or any experience of an industrial revolution or of secularized culture. It is perhaps fortunate that the initial liturgical reformers were something like sorcerers' apprentices; had they foreseen the chain reaction consequent on the first moves, we might have had to wait much longer for the initial steps of an inevitable and urgent overturn.

This overturn is in itself one of the new signs of life in the Church at the present time. Just as the mystery-cult showmanship of christian antiquity was relayed, in the development of life-signs, by the juridical organization of the mediaeval Church until our own times, so now we are living through the process of a new shift in perspective. On the basis of the spirit and statements of Vatican II,

we should be able to see why we are dissatisfied with the familiar style of worship, and also gain some insight into the characteristics of the new style which is being born. The juridical, disciplinary type of socio-religious organization was quite adequate at a time when the Church was more or less experienced as a citadel pitted against the outside world and its influences. In France it took churchmen about a century to start warming up officially to the idea of a republic; and in the english-speaking countries, the minority status of Catholics produced a parallel attitude of wariness and defence. This otherness of church life was feasible only through the acceptance by all of a unique set of language and behaviour rules enabling the members to hold their own and maintain, alongside secular culture, a parallel religious culture which imparted a strong sense of independence, originality and mission.

Nowadays this whole attitude is somewhat of a burden and an embarrassment for Catholics. We no longer ask the Church to supply us with the esoteric jargon and rules of a separate culture to which we can have recourse in order to nourish our sense of independence through the otherness of our way of thought and life. We want the Church to help us to live as Catholics without alienating us from world-culture, and yet without letting us get lost in the world. That is what the signs of life must accomplish, if we are to acknowledge their existence today. Since, as we have attempted to point out, the signs of life vary according to the objective spirit of a given social organization as a whole, we should normally expect new manifestations of vitality as we change over from the citadel to the dialogue-Church. Just as the global view of the juridical style of the Roman Catholic Church enabled us to find a justification for the *formalized*, atrophied sacramental rites as nevertheless genuine signs of life, so the view of the new Church style as a state of reform helps us to re-focus our sights and ascertain that the vitality of the Church is expressing itself anew in a very obvious way.

But hereon it is not going to be easy to justify the vitality of the individual sacraments against such a background, for the spirit of reform as a global Church life-style implies that the individual rites, among other things, are inadequate and in great need of change: it formally implies that they *lack* vitality in their present state. Nor is it of great help to point out that the liturgy is in the process of reform, since the first steps have mainly served to emphasize the necessity of a more radical approach. It may be a temporary consolation to state that mutations are particularly eloquent manifesta-

tions of the biosphere, and that we can therefore be confident in a mutating present while patiently waiting to see what gradually develops out of it in the future. In a way this is true, if we do not take too seriously the 'wait and see' part of it, because in these matters of social evolution future development depends on our own work and initiative, and we need to have some idea of the requisites in order to plan and move efficiently. As a matter of fact, the positive prospects of evolution in worship, a subject which must be broached once we admit the legitimacy of the reform spirit with its critical implications regarding specific rites, can already be foreseen, thanks to present initiatives already well advanced in many regions. The new sacramental style is making its appearance in the Church, a style that is no longer the negative assertion of the need of reform as such, but the creation of new forms. Here we can only give examples and tentative appreciations; but it is a striking fact that there is a converging spirit in many of the practical experiments actually taking place and in the conclusions of Catholic thinkers in many fields of religious research.

A theologian might express his point of view by saying that it would seem logically impossible for a contemporary community to live and pray the eucharist according to the exigencies of the New Testament and the lessons of tradition, if the places and forms of worship are determined by dogmatic formulae of the past which no longer have the same function in the life according to faith today. There is always a certain amount of interplay between a theological vision and the contemporary style of worship; a certain state of theology is correlated to the existence of separate, elevated sanctuaries, to high altars and elaborate tabernacles. These things, as indeed perhaps the very notion of a monumental church, appear as stumbling blocks to genuine modern worship.

Here perhaps is one of the crucial point in which the complexity and comprehensiveness of liturgical problems show up in their full light. Mapping out space for worship brings into play contributions from the theologican, the liturgist, the religious sociologist, the church architect and so on. It is to be expected that, in a period in which Catholics are revising their whole style of worship, the solution will not be found by replacing certain rites with others; there must be a careful consideration of the whole framework of worship. In religious architecture there is a growing awareness[1] of the anachron-

[1] There is an article on the subject in *The Month*, March (1963), by Lance Wright.

ism of monumental churches in the secular city, whatever the reasons may be and they are numerous: a church can no longer be monumental (meaning that it should dwarf secular buildings by soaring above them) without being financially crippling or scandalous, out of step with secular architectural trends, and above all at odds with what people expect of a well-planned, functional living space today.

Because of the hospitable, relaxed, chatty atmosphere of contemporary group encounters, walking into a monumental church is like entering an ice-box or a museum. Innumerable details contribute to this impression: the minister, wrapped up in coloured robes, separated from the worshippers by railings and steps, never really welcomes anyone in particular and extends anonymous greetings in conventional terms. Once you have found a seat you are condemned to it, with your coat on, and often with nothing much more than the backs of others to look at, and no prospect of exchange; and yet you are all there for a vitally important motive. Neither this type of worhsip-space nor the cremonies that go on inside it can be signs of life today, because their obvious meaning is to draw us out of our every-day habits and behaviour-patterns, and even out of our own times. They are like empty shells and cannot be full-bodied, since we expect something that on the contrary maintains the dialogue between ourselves as Catholics and our familiar occupations; but these churches and ceremonies were inspired by a quite different situation of Catholicism.

Because of this *malaise* and because of the almost complete lack of enlightened modern religious constructions,[1] Catholics in many parts of the world are worshipping where the new style of signs can thrive, in the very places where they really *live*, in their houses, one might say in the living-room.[2] It is to be foreseen that in such places the rites will not be the same as those that are embalmed in the monumental churches. 'Apartment-masses', as they are sometimes called in the United States, are opportunities for pursuing the urgent quest of sincerity and effectiveness in the service of the Word and the eucharistic prayer; the vivacious atmosphere of a

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[1] An excellent booklet from Belgium analyses the situation. Cf Debuyst, D. F., 'Architecture moderne et célébration chrétienne', *Paroisse et Liturgie* 74 *(Biblica,* Publications de Saint-André, 1966).

[2] The periodical *Notitiae,* published in Rome by the Consilium for the Application of the Conciliar Constitution on Liturgy, enables the reader to follow these experiments throughout the world.

living-room influences the gestures and behaviour-patterns which take place there. It is probably in these situations that contemporary Catholics, under the guidance of the clergy, are in the process of developing the forms of worship which will spontaneously appear to be full of life. They will simply *be* the signs of life and not have to be intellectually explained as such.

It would be a pity if these trends and experiments were to be confined for long to small groups of fervent Catholics. But only if the places of worship, including new church buildings, are conceived rationally and functionally in the light of the demands of the new spirit, can there be any hope of a rapid general change. The qualities required of a modern place of worship have often been described. Whether or not a multi-functional space is desirable, it should at any rate be hospitable (cloak-rooms, nurseries for the children, comfortable seats can do a lot to extend a genuine welcome) and, instead of pinning people down next to each other in mutual ignorance, should actually bring them together for mutual religious expression, a thing which is not possible without architectural arrangements implicitly inviting the faithful to move around at ease and not to feel that conversational exchange is irreverent or taboo. It is no wonder that the really significant attempts at liturgical renewal go on outside the churches, and yet something could be done, and quite soon, especially in the english-speaking countries. In many places a psychological situation has developed which makes it downright scandalous and contrary to the feelings and intimate persuasions of the faithful to build a monumental church.[1]

Therefore it is urgent to foresee the new approaches. It is rather illuminating to hear continental authors,[2] in countries where the liturgical movement has a much longer history than here, express the opinion that the most significant moves in modern church architecture could well come from adapting the anglo-saxon institution of the 'one room house', with its unique space and movable partitions. It affords a maximum of day-light, uses simple and inexpensive materials, can be adapted to all sorts of functions and thus assures the type of hospitality people are used to today. 'It protects without discrimination, isolates without segregation, and contributes both to the community spirit and to a feeling of individual freedom.

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[1] It is impossible for anyone but an englishman to judge the Liverpool experience; but *Time*, in the January 15th issue of this year, has a revealing article on the rejection of cathedral building among the faithful in America.

[2] Debuyst, D. F., *loc cit.*, p 42.

These are the very qualities to be transferred and adapted to give us the places of worship we are looking for'.[1]

In this article on the sacraments as the 'signs of life', we have particularly insisted upon the problems of creating a space for worship. This is because the root of ritual expression in the individual sacraments, the general style of life in the Church, is going through a period of transformation. If the sacraments are to appear to modern men as vivacious, life-giving happenings, they must have the characteristics we expect to find in the behaviour-patterns of a religious society which declares itself in a state of dialogue with the world: language and gestures truly capable of instructing and guiding us because we feel they are our own, communication between the problems of witnessing to the faith in the modern world and what is done and said in church, greatly extended possibilities for each one to have his say, and to determine the style and forms of worship, rather than authoritarian decisions by the clergy alone. But it will be practically impossible for specific sacramental ceremonies to take on these characteristics, which would seem to be a logical expression of the general spirit in the Church and are also precisely those which show up in the creative trends of liturgical renewal today, if the liturgical space is out of key with and stunts the growth of the living signs. That is why the structure of the space in which people meet to worship is of such vital importance.

What we have tried to point out here is that nothing can be a sign of life if it is not first of all, in its appearance when we encounter it on the level of ordinary experience, convincingly life-like and vivacious. It is perhaps a mistake to try to persuade people that our liturgical rites as such are signs of life, since many of them, quite frankly, are defunct. The mistake is all the more apparent when the argument is based on the application of patristic commentaries to modern practices; for these latter are often but sketchy survivals, out of touch with the modern mind, compared to the splendid ceremonies which inspired the Fathers of the Church. We have seen that, granted the traditional rites have lost much of their power as life-signs, this entails no belittling of the Church's vitality: the whole of Roman Catholic life for centuries, with its peculiarly juridical style, was a sign of great vitality. Today the juridical has in turn declined as a sign of life-power, but in considering it we have learned not to narrow our attention down to isolated ritual words

[1] *Ibid.*

and gestures. It is the Church herself who is the primary sacrament, the root of ritual ceremonies, and it is only on the basis of a global view of the Church's spirit that we can give a correct appraisal of the life-giving signs.

This global approach enables us to understand that neither the decline of the mystery-cult liturgy, nor of juridical formalism, means in any way a decline in the Church's vitality. Today again there is an explosion of vitality creating a new style, the style of a Church in the state of reform, with more than a few hints as to what is coming in the future. The important thing is for each and every one of us to realize that we cannot be faithful to the Spirit in these times by simply waiting irresponsibly for the solution to be brought in for us by others, even if they are the clergy. The sacraments *should be* signs of life; that much we learn from the bible, from the example of the patristic era and from the ultramontanist law-centred periods of Church history. But their sacraments were expressions of *their* style of life, not of ours. It therefore is up to us to create the new signs, and to make sure that they are suffused with the power of life. This is a heavy but fascinating task; one indeed which requires considerable collaboration between clergy and faithful, on the basis of mutual confidence and a relaxed sense of freedom and responsibility in prudent experimentation.