Spirituality needs a body

Symbolic practices and Catholic identity

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SOME YEARS AGO I TRAVELLED WITH A GROUP of US teenagers and young adults on a pilgrimage to Taizé. At home in the cities of Chicago, Atlanta or New York, where they attended Protestant churches, they were suddenly adrift in the alien environment of tiny Burgundian villages and a large monastic compound. Unable to connect with the world around them, my travelling companions withdrew, claiming fatigue and boredom. On our third afternoon, a couple of them wandered into a small shop in one of Taizé's neighbouring villages and spotted among the shopkeeper's wares some dusty glass bottles of Coca-Cola. The shopkeeper charged them dearly, yet they happily turned over their unfamiliar francs. The next day, and the next, the number of buyers grew, quickly exhausting the woman's limited supply. But by that time the displaced American urbanites had begun savouring the crusty bread, fruit and cheese and the lemonade and water that were Taizé staples; they were also joining with greater regularity in the daily rhythm of Taizé activities.

During their transition into this unfamiliar world I had watched from afar, puzzled by their readiness to spend all they had on Coke. From what I undoubtedly assumed then to be a higher viewpoint (I was over thirty and a professed Benedictine), I found myself sizing up my travelling companions: very American, perhaps even 'ugly American'; all-too-conspicuous specimens of our consumer society. Only much later did I arrive at fuller insight into that long-forgotten episode. The French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet's discussion of the dynamics of symbol in his *Symbol and sacrament* held a key to what I had not understood.

Symbol is simultaneously the vehicle for cognition and *recognition*, says Chauvet. It was the latter operation that I had not attended to at Taizé, either in my own case or the case of my companions. Symbol as a language of recognition is 'the foundation of the identity of the group and the individual'. Even further, symbol 'is the agent of cohesion (successful or not) between subjects within

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their cultural world . . .'[1] Put concretely, the dusty bottles of Coke – something they recognized – mediated for the young urban Americans recognition of their shared humanity with the village woman. Almost nothing else was familiar: neither her language, nor her other foods, nor her countryside; neither her commercial procedures nor what she and her neighbours counted as customary daily activity. Neither did they recognize in the European monastic ways of praying and gathering their own American Protestant ways of being Christian. They could not orientate themselves. Yet the profound loss of identity that is culture shock gave way through symbolic exchange to mutual recognition. Interestingly, the shopkeeper and the young Americans developed a bond that outlived her supply of Coke. More importantly, the initially alienated Americans opened up to the world into which they had been dropped. Reoriented by what I had judged a banal symbol, my companions soon began to enter into the varied activities that built trust among the many strangers with strange ways who would be their community at Taizé.

But what of me, who had remained aloof from this preoccupation with the shopkeeper and Coca-Cola? What had blocked or displaced my sharing in the group's disorientation and reorientation? Like them, I was an urban American in rural Europe for the first time and I found things equally unfamiliar. But my link was monastic identity. I had recognized myself in the common monastic prayer patterns from the first day and so had never felt wholly alien. Monastic prayer structures and bottles of Coke served equally as symbols 'in the order of recognition, of summons, and of challenge'. What my travelling companions and I needed and each found in our new location were symbols through which we had recognized ourselves as connected in an alien cultural world. In Chauvet's words, such a non-linguistic symbol is '*the mediator of our identities as subjects within [the] cultural world it brings with itself, whose unconscious "precipitate" it is*'. Cultural worlds are worlds of relationships lived out and celebrated, identities affirmed and meanings maintained. Coke bottles and the chanting of psalms were such precipitates; they served as points of entry.

Practices reconsidered: exercising the spirit

Chauvet's main focus in his study of sacrament and symbol is on the place of *linguistic* symbols as sacramental mediators of identity and meaning. His discussion of non-linguistic symbols is almost

incidental. This essay will focus on the role of *non-linguistic ritual symbols* as mediating realities in the construction of authentic Christian spiritual identity. My claim is that what Chauvet calls non-linguistic symbols, among them *symbolic bodily practices*, are integral to Catholic ecclesial identity, precisely because symbolic bodily practices are integral to human identity.

The socio-biological basis for my position is to be found in the scientific recognition that repeated physical acts establish neurological tracings that give peoples distinct cultural bodies. So the multi-tonal speaking of south-east Asian peoples, the yoga postures of the Indian sub-continent, and African drumming and dancing can be taken into adult western bodies only with self-conscious attention, and even then only with great difficulty, although these forms of bodiliness and their social meanings are 'natural' to those for whom they are lifelong cultural practice. Correlatively, many therapies attend to bodily practice in order to recognize, release and heal the human spirit. Serious graphologists analyse handwriting and find in the strokes of our pens disclosures of our spirited or dispirited persons. Practitioners of the healing arts locate centres of energy in our bodies and work to augment or redirect them. Spiritual teachers instruct spiritual seekers how to sit and how to breathe and how to handle material objects. Spirit cannot be disembodied. Spirit can be exercised and shaped by bodily practice. The traditional wisdom of all religions and cultures has long affirmed this.

What incarnational belief demands

Spirituality needs a body. The central Christian doctrines of incarnation, bodily resurrection, the historical Church as the sacrament of Christ who is the sacrament of salvation – each says the same thing. The point has also been made repeatedly in traditions of ascetical disciplines and symbolic bodily practices. In modern investigations of Christian bodily practice, most attention has been paid to practices of physical deprivations. Less interest has been shown to date in antique and medieval bodily practices that served the symbolic construction of Christian identity. Yet brief reflection on the 'sign of the cross' as a talisman of Catholic and Orthodox identity can illustrate how symbolic bodily practice contributes to the construction of identity.

Modern students of medieval practices are often bemused upon learning that Christians in western Europe once 'did penance' by repetitive outstretchings of their arms in cruciform position.

Physically arduous, the practice appears from this distance as apparently mindless religious callisthenics. It is possible that such a practice was more than accommodation to the dullness of uncatechized peasant sensibilities in a period of religious decline; is it possible it was meant to exercise the flagging spirit? I was helped to imagine an alternative possibility when, on a Good Friday, a young adult with severe physical limitations proclaimed his faith during the liturgy the only way he could. He rose unsteadily and took the cruciform position, sustaining the posture as long as he could before weak spine and flailing arms defeated him. His bodily proclamation demanded our recognition of the mystery.

As early as the third century, the North African catechist and theologian Tertullian had called symbolic bodily practices *exomologesis*, a confessional act; the same word is used in Christian antiquity for the eucharistic prayer. In context, Tertullian was writing about sacramental penance and was discussing ascetical deprivations, including fasting and the wearing of sackcloth and ashes. But his word choice invites further insight. Symbolic bodily practice announces and affirms or reaffirms identity, not only who we are but who we aspire to be.[2] The actor's act is both self-referential and proclamatory. This ancient form of proclamation is still accessible to everyone who has a body.

There are no pre-modern or traditional Christians unfamiliar with some variation of this symbolic identifying practice of cross-making. (More about modern Christians – Protestant and Catholic – in a moment.) Catholic and Orthodox identities are expressed and embraced through the very marking of one's own body with the shape of the cross. Yet variations in identifying bodily practice also express ecclesial difference. While Western Catholics cross their bodies forehead to breast, then left shoulder to right, Eastern Christians cross from right to left. What is your ecclesial heritage? It is inscribed in your body for others to recognize, even if you have never asked the question or cannot explain the difference. Among Catholics themselves there are further differences. Hispanic Catholic practice specifies that the hand tracing the cross shape on one's own body be symbolically structured: forefinger and thumb are turned into a cross to be kissed, while three raised fingers simultaneously affirm trinitarian faith. Symbolic bodily practice can express shared spiritual identity while simultaneously proclaiming and inscribing unforgettable difference.

Adults who determine to reverse the bodily practice learned in infancy or childhood or who take on alien bodily practice as a path toward conversion or spiritual maturing know that they are involved in self-conscious renegotiation of personal identity and relatedness. Catholics who become Orthodox or Melkite make the journey through the body. So too a Christian who determines to embrace Buddhism (not merely to dip into things exotic) cannot bypass the body.

Abandonment of bodily practice

Interestingly, with the rise of modernity Protestant Christians abandoned this practice of tracing the cross on their bodies, perhaps because the practice was a precipitate of the medieval ecclesial culture from which they were breaking away. Or perhaps it was only that the times favoured more modern forms of proclamation, the linear and discursive forms supported by the invention of the printing press. Symbolic bodily practice must have seemed merely externalized – without spirit – to people caught up in the new learning and technology. In the midst of western European cultural shifts leading into modernity, churchmen preferred to preach the cross and write instructive hymn texts, aiming to impress the human spirit primarily through the word. This, too, involved bodiliness, of course, but the large muscles of symbolic practice atrophied. As twentieth-century Catholics in the US and in western European countries have continued to assimilate into either dominant Protestant or rational secular cultures, they too have embraced the modern bias. Recent Catholic generations have been less likely to require that their children learn identifying Catholic practice, because they themselves use it less. Even Protestants reportedly are singing and preaching less about the cross.

Perhaps there is something to be learned by reflecting on the weakened grasp of Catholic Christian identity in the modern world and the steady decline of symbolic bodily practice. What, if anything, is going on here? Even as modernity seems to be winning the day, a generation is rising up for whom Catholic symbolic bodily practice is once again attractive as a way to satisfy the deep hunger for authentic spiritual identity. A young woman whose ecclesial life of twenty-five years took its shape in the milieu of New Zealand secular culture recently recounted the power for religious commitment she drew from a recent world youth day experience. African Catholics danced the shape of the cross together and then invited

her, with her postmodern cohort of young western Catholics, into the dance that is the cross. She then showed us a fragment of the dance as best she could. The talisman of the cross performed and remembered had become a sign writ large, a proclamation of emerging Catholic identity requiring a global gathering to give it bodily expression. But then talismans are meant to be revelatory. The human meanings evoked but not spoken in this symbolic event led this reporting participant to recognize possibilities for new transformed ways of being in the world in Christ.

New generations of Catholics are exploring once again the bodiliness of spiritual identity and the correlation between corporate symbolic practices and spiritual insight. Some of it is romantic. Some of it is silly. Some of it is serious play. Romantic or serious, it invites a contemporary revival of mystagogical spiritual formation in the churches – a matter to be picked up below. First, we must recognize a distinctive feature of the new *post*modern situation in which symbolic bodily practices are being embraced at the popular level.

Practices: communal traditions in changed circumstances

Initially, it might seem a gain for the Catholic tradition of sacramental spirituality that postmodern sensibilities have swung round from purely rational interests to renewed interest in spiritual bodiliness. But an important new factor has to be noted in assessing the significance for ecclesial life of recent western developments in spirituality. Ecclesial traditions have been concerned to inscribe individual bodies through spiritual practices so that practitioners enter more deeply into a communal – yes, institutionalized – spiritual horizon. It is within the community called Church, the Body of Christ, that each baptized believer is encouraged to take up practices to 'put on Christ'. In contrast with this presumption that the outcome of bodily practice would be adherence to the ecclesial body, postmodern spiritual practice typically has other priorities. As part of its legacy from modernity, postmodernity put emphasis on the solitary individual's spiritual search.

Thus a distinctive element in a postmodern spiritual quest is its eclectic approach to spiritual practices. This is evident in popular readiness to borrow whatever 'works' to advance self-discovery and self-fulfilment. A shelf of practices is considered available for the taking: native American, hesychast, yoga, wiccan, Celtic, kabbalist, zen and many, many more. In this eclectic approach, practices are disconnected from their original communal contexts, which were

constructed worlds of meanings and commitments. Newly spun rearrangements and permutations are less likely to evoke long-standing communal commitments precisely because they are seldom grounded in stable communities. In fact, one of the outcomes of postmodern interest in traditional spiritual practices is the weakening of communal commitments.

Within parts of the Catholic community, strategies taken from postmodern eclecticism in the choice of symbolic bodily practice are discernible. In the United States one manifestation is the popular retrieval of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century devotional and ascetical practices now disconnected from their original worlds of meaning, the culture of immigrant European Catholicism. So, for example, abstaining from meat on Friday was distinctively Catholic in America with its predominantly Protestant non-abstaining milieu. The Friday of my youth was a world of codfish cakes and tuna-noodle casseroles at home paired with novenas and the way of the cross in the parish church. Fish-eating Catholics were engaged in practices that connected self-discipline and mortification with the memory of Christ's passion and their own institutional identity. But at the end of the twentieth century, fish-eating in the US can mean any combination of the following: making heart-smart food choices; sufficient affluence to afford fish; indifference to troubled ecosystems in the world's oceans; one's origins in a meat-eating culture, and social status such that abstaining is experienced as an act of voluntary self-denial. Further, as the number of vegans and vegetarians continues to grow, young people with those commitments are unlikely to identify either personally or religiously with fish-eating as a symbol of Catholic identity. In their world of committed green refusal to consume animal products and devoid of public Stations of the Cross, connection of Friday abstinence with the passion of Christ is tenuous. So should the US episcopal conference, which is currently studying the question, opt now to strengthen Catholic identity through the retrieval of the earlier practice of Friday Catholic abstinence, this decision would not thereby re-establish the earlier world of meaning and identity that was Catholic immigrant culture.

To say this is not to minimize the current need for shared communal ascetical and symbolic bodily practices among the Catholic people. It is rather to underscore the point that apparent continuity in isolated symbolic practice is not enough to stabilize spiritual meanings and commitments in the face of major cultural, social and

religious transitions. Because symbol as a 'language of recognition' is 'the foundation and identity of the group and the individual' (Chauvet), such an assessment does not lead to the conclusion that common symbols are totally unavailable to the Church. Rather, communal symbolic practices must be more radically grounded in the Christ-event itself in order to accomplish their purpose of becoming a shared language of recognition.

Reflections on practice: the usefulness of theory

In mid-century the cultural anthropologist Victor W. Turner developed an account of the dynamism of corporate symbols which has continued to commend itself to ritual and liturgical theorists.[3] Turner came to the insights that gave birth to his theory while studying symbolic ritual process among the Ndembu people of Zambia. He focused on symbolic bodily practice – the practice of the communal tribal body and of the persons who comprised the community as they engaged in signifying practices that proclaimed and reaffirmed the world of meaning in which they lived. Turner's account of the origins and dynamism of shared symbolic ritual and its effective use in a tribal context has proved helpful in more complex social situations also needing interpretation.

Putting worlds together

Turner proposed that the central symbols of any cultural tradition arise necessarily from four identifiable sources: the people's cosmic experience, human bodily experience, cultural experience and historical experience. Reflection shows that the Christian sacramental tradition of symbolic bodily practice is no exception. In the symbol formation of every world of meaning, these several levels of experience are always 'layered' so that every core symbol is multivalent. It bears multiple levels of significance that interact to generate complex fields of meaning. As will become evident, for Christians dispersed in the world's many cultures, it is the *historical* memory of Jesus and the Church that plays a critical role in the construction of identifying Catholic practices.

What Turner specifies as the *cosmic* source of symbolic forms and practices is inevitably particular and local, since people's location on the earth and their ensuing relationship with the planets and stars, the passing of seasons, and the geographical contours of their own physical environment is what will find expression in their symbol forms. Even at the level of *human bodily experience* – birth,

dying, hunger and eating, thirst and drinking, bodily emission, breathing, pulse, copulation, sexual ecstasy, physical pain and so on – symbolic practices will be particular, since culture is involved even in apprehension of our own bodies. At the level of *cultural experience*, relationships among humans in their social, economic and ecological environments will evoke forms for central symbols, as will cultural achievements like the construction of the calendar, knowledge of the physical world, canons of the beautiful, and philosophies of human nature. At the level of *the historical*, two threads will come together. The community's narrative of events and persons that have contributed to the people's identity will be inserted into the narrative of the Christ-event in every cultural setting where the Church takes root.

Whatever the realm of experience that gives rise to shared symbolic forms and practices, all the symbols generated will be material and particular. They are always mediated through the world known to their users; through their very use they express, shape and reshape living worlds of meaning and commitment. It is this aspect of particularity that locates bodily symbolic practices within the 'language of recognition'.

Mutually charged meanings and commitments

Turner offered another thoughtful hypothesis concerning the complex field of meaning characteristic of communally used ritual symbols. It has subsequently been further refined by later ritual theorists and liturgical scholars. In Turner's view, shared symbolic practices draw practitioners into a magnetic field of meaning and commitments. The metaphor 'magnetic field' suggests mutually charging poles which hold matters in dynamic tension.

For purposes of illustration, consider in this regard the practice of signing oneself with the cross. Turner identified the 'poles' in the field of meaning of any particular symbolic form as points where references to larger realities cluster. At one pole affective meanings come together, at the other normative meanings. The 'charge' between them is such that what is communally *necessary* (that is, the normative demands of communal commitment) is also *attractive* because of what the practitioners desire or fear (the blessings promised or dangers to be avoided). Thus suffering and even death, new life through adherence to the Body of Christ and participation in its mission, are meanings integral to the Christian symbol of the sign of the cross. Across their lifetimes, believers in communities of

interpretation discover together the concrete forms in which they are to embrace the realities to which the symbolic practice point them. If the young New Zealand woman's insight into the Christian mystery in the dance of the cross was radical, perhaps only part of it will ever come to consciousness and be translated into daily living.

Who decides what symbols mean?

Further reflection has led theoreticians since Turner to note that some distinctions need to be made to grasp the range of mutually charged meanings coalescing in the 'meaning field' of any public symbolic practice.[4] Official, public and private meanings are both related and separable. Official meanings are those pronounced by authorities and experts, both living and dead teachers of a faith tradition. The Scriptures as read in the church, official liturgical books and doctrinal statements in various genres record official meanings in the Catholic communion. Public meanings are the meanings available and operating within particular communities of believers in space and time. Private meanings are tied to personal experience.

Public meanings are those which actively engage the local church, tying its commitments and aspirations to its symbolic practices. It is at the local level that selected official meanings associated with symbolic practices are made publicly available so they can be appropriated, transformed and set in relationships leading to 'recognition'. In this process of public engagement with symbolic bodily practices, the tradition exists as communal tradition. It shapes local churches and they in turn contribute to the continuing shape of the tradition. At this level of public appropriation pastors, teachers, preachers, artists, composers and musicians, charismatic and wisdom figures will draw on local historical situations and communal circumstances, making recognizable connections to produce public meaning. The sign of the cross danced communally by Africans in Rome is an instance of official engagement with public tradition, particular local meanings made available and authoritatively transformed through public symbolic practice. So also is the communal practice of Friday prayer at the cross, which has its origins at Taizé, an 'authoritative' public form of bodily symbolic practice.

Individual believers are also active in the production of meaning through their participation in public symbolic practices. In some instances personal insights powerful enough to be recognized by a community of believers can enter into the mainstream of living tradition. Who within the Spanish Church initiated the now distinctive

public, quasi-official practice of the sign of the cross that is also trinitarian? Under what circumstances did this practice come to engage and shape the community's recognition of its religious identity? As Raymond Firth has argued in another context,[5] the movement from personal recognition to public or official meaning is likely to be mediated by institutional 'authorities'. It is more often the case that personal insights into the commitments and benefits of life shaped by the cross remain personal, even as they are supported by public symbolic practice. Yet anyone's idiosyncratic insights, fixed in memory through bodily practice, can remain active and operative throughout a lifetime.

Catholic spiritual practices today

These theoretical considerations have implications for the vitality of the Catholic tradition of sacramental spirituality. One issue pertinent to the western postmodern religious situation can be discussed briefly here. It is evident that traditional symbolic bodily practice aims to connect practitioners with spiritual realities that first came to disclosure and find their continuing power in communities of interpretation. Thus the postmodern tendency for individuals and groups to appropriate traditional symbolic practices and to combine them in new ways while rejecting communal commitments introduces a significant rupture in practice. The long-term dynamism of disconnected symbols is in doubt, because spiritual identity that is self-referential and without communal obligation is a novel development. Further, traditional understandings of spirituality have commonly affirmed that spiritual growth is experienced and finds expression through self-transcendence guided by wisdom figures. The world's religions have thematized their distinctive orientations toward the mystery at the heart of human desire (which Karl Rahner named 'the whither of our transcendence'[6]) in myths and scriptures, symbolic forms, symbolic practices and ethical obligations, and handed on these thematizations from one generation to the next. In each successive generation's interactions with these symbolic forms and practices, peoples came to recognize the significance of their ordinary lives in relation to ultimate reality.

Within this abundance of religious understandings turned to symbols, narratives and practices, Catholic spirituality uses a distinctive language of relationship – trinitarian communion, covenant fidelity, the world as sacrament, the baptized community as the mystical Body of Christ, reconciliation and forgiveness – to characterize the

transcendent movement. The movement is toward interconnectedness: with the mysterious three-person God, with believers living and dead, with the world created as good, with strangers and outsiders who are also children of God. It is communal, catholic. Christian spirituality further focuses the relationships of ultimate significance as relationships 'in, with, and through Christ'.

Given the intrinsic relationality of this tradition of spirituality, why are sizeable numbers of Catholic Christians attracted to leaving their own communal traditions, at least for a time if not permanently, to seek new connections or even to construct alternative worlds of ultimate significance? An extrapolation from Victor Turner's reflections on the working of symbolic practice suggests at least two possibilities. It may be true in some cases that western Catholics experience the obligations of life in Christ as too burdensome, because they reject communality in its many forms as a problematic premise, one alien to the modern or postmodern spiritual existence they are seeking. A formal decision may have led them to make their own life project the modern project of the construction of the autonomous self or the postmodern project rejecting all claims to ultimate meaning. In such a case, the cross-shape no longer has an engaging point of reference. Diminished in significance, the cross may remain a cultural resource for designers and decorators and spiritual tourists, but its magnetic field of mutually charged meanings no longer pulls and holds as it once did. Whatever spiritual practices are taken up are adopted in the service of something other than life in the Body of Christ.

In other cases, something else may be discernible that may be characterized as symbolic overload. Traditional symbolic practices can accrue references that obstruct the spiritual seeker's capacity to recognize in Catholic Christianity a world of redemptive relationships. The struggle here is not that the obligations and commitment of life in Christ are too burdensome. The confusion is whether what has been handed on as the obligations and commitments of life in Christ is recognizable as worthy of commitment in changed situations. I am positing here the possibility that believers seeking the self-transcendence that is mature life in Christ can become doubters or drifters because too little or the wrong things are controlling the official or public meaning fields of traditional Catholic practices. Let me speak by way of illustration of the situation of contemporary Catholic women in contrast with that of medieval European

Christian women as the latter situation was set out in Carolyn Walker Bynum's work *Holy fast, holy feast.*

As Bynum recounts it, medieval women had no official obstacles placed in the way of their publicly and privately identifying their own bodies with the body of Christ, who 'bled, fed, suffered and died' for the life of the world. Such identification was even supported through publicly available ecclesial traditions. In the contemporary ecclesial milieu such self-recognition is commonly belittled through official qualification. While note is often taken of the worldwide 'emergence of women' as one of the 'signs of the times', current official interpretations of the christological tradition propose that the historical physical maleness of Jesus of Nazareth is a constitutive factor in his redemptive relationship with the world. Women's public and private efforts to engage in symbolic practice to the contrary clearly have power to keep some women 'connected' to the ecclesial mystery of life in Christ. (I have in my drawer a notecard which has a pen sketch of Mary with the message: 'And it was a woman who first said: This is my Body – This is my Blood'.) The cruciform *Christa* in New York's cathedral of St John the Divine was another public effort to negotiate recognizable meaning. Yet official 'loading' of the meaning field of Christ crucified with references that are 'unrecognizable' to people seeking a life of discipleship can erode the credibility and dynamic attractiveness of christological faith.

Regaining the vitality of the body

What can be done when the controlling community of interpretation becomes the obstacle to vital spiritual practice? Faith-sharing takes many forms; all of them need to be valued. Gifted believers have always turned personal and communal experiences of the living mystery of life in Christ into song and image and symbolic and ethical practices and forms of the common life. But the further task of making explicit the connections between the mystery recognized, the mystery symbolized and the mystery lived is the work of mystagogical reflection. Only vital communities of believers can help one another to recognize the mystery of salvation in which they are always already implicated. As it has come down to us, the mystagogical tradition of the great bishops of the fourth and fifth centuries shows us authorities handing on the faith of the Church. Yet even bishops were first receivers, gifted with the faith of the churches into which they were baptized, as their biographies readily show.

They remained learners even when they became teachers. The conditions for authentic mystagogy are radically ecclesial, because the Holy Spirit enlivens the whole body in order that the message can resound.

Ours is a time of rapid social and cultural transition, when modern and postmodern and pre-modern peoples, baptized believers all, seek to recognize and embody the one mystery of Christ as it has been announced on one small planet with many cultures and in a vast universe. Common symbols and symbolic practices that reach across generations and between cultures, even while acknowledging their particularity, can make possible continuing self-recognition and mutual recognition in the face of great discontinuities. In this discussion I have focused on the sign of the cross as a central symbolic practice for constituting Catholic identity. Its *official use* – in every liturgy and on every occasion from enrolment in the catechumenate through to the final commendation of the dead – makes it a practice universally available to the churches. But there is *communal* and *personal* work to be done with this practice so that its meaning does not erode and so lose its attractive and compelling force. Romantic and nostalgic Catholic retrieval of symbolic practices may be a starting point towards the deepening of Catholic identity, but it is not an acceptable alternative to long-term commitment to the demands of the Gospel.

Fear of religious imagination within the community of interpretation touches on a wide range of ecclesial matters. The young churches of Asia and Africa received the message of salvation in the form of symbolic practices so identified with western culture that practitioners can fail to discern the Holy Spirit of Jesus or to recognize themselves in the Good News. They have public work to do. Young people caught up in the process of globalization and space exploration wonder how life in Christ might connect them with what is happening. What relationships does the practice of the sign of the cross refer them to in these new contexts? Intergenerational and cross-cultural narratives of life at the cross need to be brought to consciousness and shared. The theologian Franz Joseph van Beeck once wrote that our human concerns are the names we give to Christ.[7] If he is correct, as I believe he is, our Catholic communities must, through memory and imagination, regain their power to weave into a recognizable world of meaning and practice our Christian selves with our new concerns and emerging commitments.

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NOTES

1 *Symbol and sacrament* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), p 125; see pp 110–128 for fuller discussion.
2 *De poenitentia* 9, 2–5.
3 *The forest of symbols* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1967). His theory is further refined and developed in all his subsequent work.
4 The Ritual Language Study Group of the North American Liturgy in the 1970s and 1980s was the place these discussions occurred. See the subsequent work of Gilbert Ostdiek, Margaret Mary Kelleher, Lawrence Hoffman and Mary Collins.
5 *Symbols: public and private* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1973), pp 226–240; also pp 215–216, 222.
6 'The concept of mystery in Catholic theology' in *Theological investigations IV* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1974), pp 48ff.
7 *Christ proclaimed: Christology as rhetoric* (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), pp 146–162.