Sacramental abundance

An economy of gift

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THE LATIN LITURGY FROM ITS INCEPTION dubbed the mystery which it celebrated an *admirabile commercium*, an amazing exchange. This is an exchange which has its origin in God's loving mercy and whose principal manifestation is the incarnation of the Word. In expressing the mystery of the incarnation, however, the liturgy did not say that the Word received something from humanity. Rather, God is praised for taking what has already been given in creative love to transform it even more lovingly. There is no suggestion of reciprocation in this exchange of the human and the divine, for all comes from God's bounty. It is an exchange in which God receives nothing and the world appears as pure gift, existing only in the breath of the divine exchange. In sacramental ritual, humans bring forward their bread, wine, oil and water, with song, with dance, with intercession, with blessing, in commemoration of this divine condescension. But such rites only underline that these are gifts that come from the gratuitous generosity of the Creator. They give voice and body to a kind of wonder that what is already wonderful may be made still more wondrous through invocation of the mystery of the Word made flesh.

In the light of this amazing exchange, one asks if and how sacramental celebration nourishes the spirit, not just of a person, but of a community, a people, an age. Early Christian texts spoke of the gift of the Body and Blood through the blessed elements of bread and wine, as gifts 'for the forgiveness of sin and for immortality'. The affliction of sin gets healing, and the human person receives nourishing, through the same action and the same gift. In our present world of technique and technology, can we be equally open and responsive to God's gifts?

Appreciating gratuitousness

In one of Frank O'Connor's short stories,[1] a mother and wife gently teases a husband and father with a saying from a business manual of which he is fond, that there is no such thing as an out-

and-out free gift, just at a moment when he has found that the only response to some misdemeanour on his adolescent son's part has been purely gratuitous forgiveness. It is clearly hard for the man to accept that the pain in his son's face has prompted this response and that he has inflicted no punishment, asked for nothing in return. In his family and work ethic, everything has to be earned, not always indeed at a price proportionate to what is given, but never without some payment.

It is this kind of attitude, so common in our human dealings, that makes it difficult for us truly to appreciate the gratuitousness and the generosity of what is given to us through Christian sacraments. Today, however, this seems to be compounded by matters peculiar to our age. From the way in which we live, order our lives and regulate social realities, we are left asking three questions.

Firstly, how can we, in a time of computerization and remote control, get beyond the stranglehold that technique and concept have on language, so that it may speak 'in, with and under' bread, wine, oil and water, through a poetics that allows the things themselves to come to speech, and through them the gift of divine love and divine life that Jesus and the Spirit have poured into them?

Secondly, how can we overcome the human propensity to 'steward' the earth in a proprietary way, in order to allow ourselves to dwell on it as recipients of the gifts which it gives, with no other obligation than that of making sure that they flow freely to all the children of the earth?

And finally, how can we dare threaten our faith in providence with the remembrance of suffering that Christian remembrance draws from us? To each of these issues we can try to respond in turn, by appeal to what is expressed in sacramental celebration.

A sense of sacramental poetics

In an interview with an American magazine, the Irish poet Seamus Heaney speaks of the loss in perspective on the world which comes from economic and social change. On what he deems to have disappeared from Irish Catholic consciousness, he has this to say:

> I would say that the more important Catholic thing is the actual sense of eternal values and infamous vices which our education or formation gives us. There's a sense of profoundness, a sense that the universe can be ashimmer with something, and Catholicism . . .

> was the backdrop to the whole thing. The world I grew up in offered me a sense that I was a citizen of the empyrean – the crystalline elsewhere of the world. But I think that's gone from Catholicism now.[2]

We can appreciate what Heaney sees as loss, and the yearning for something as strong to take the place of the old verities. At the same time, he shows perfect sensitivity to the oppressiveness of much in the old religious system. The poet has an ear for the subjection imposed by the old ways and so expresses no desire to return to them as such. In his mother's many devotions and prayers, common to the women of his boyhood, he sees indeed the closeness to God and to the world of spirit, but he also finds the sounds of protest, protest voiced in the only language available to her against life's burdens and injustices. The prayers and devotions of the women of his boyhood, subjected to a certain way of life as child-bearers, mothers and housewives, he sees as both 'a wilful adherence to the compensations of Catholicism' and 'a cry of rage and defiance'.

Is it then still possible to release the power of the symbols of the holy within Christian tradition, even though they may have been submerged within the rigidity of religious and social systems? A positive answer to this question requires a fresh recovery of the things of earth so vital to Christian sacrament, of the word of the Gospel, and of the voices that have so often been silent within society and within the churches. The poetry of dwelling together, around and from the gifts of earth, needs to be given expression. The holy is not to be distanced by hieratic structure, as it often was in the past. It is rather to be welcomed, by apt vocal and bodily ritual, into the well's water and the table's offerings, so that there Christians may find themselves gathered as Christ's disciples, with Christ in the midst of them. It is in virtue of the place which these elements have in keeping memory of him that his disciples, his beloved, his chosen ones, find the holiness of God in the lives that are sustained by these creatures of earth.

From a Catholic perspective, God is at the heart of the cosmos, where humans are called by sacrament to dwell, where the Word is spoken and the Spirit breathes, just as it did at the dawn of creation and in the stillness of the nights of the sacrifice of Isaac, the deliverance from Egypt, and the coming of the Messiah. Such indwelling comes not only from the fact that God is Lord over all things, and therein performs his saving actions. It is more deeply that the world

is 'ashimmer' with divine beneficence. This is not because it is a mirror of the Godhead, but because it is an expression and gift of the divine plenty, of the outpouring of wondrous gifts from God. The invitation to life and comfort that appears in such an ordinary spectacle as a table laid with bread and wine is spoken in the poem of Georg Trakl:

> Wanderer, come in and dine;
> Pain has petrified the sill.
> In pure splendour sparkle still
> On the table bread and wine.[3]

Admiration for the wonder, bounty and holiness of what gives us life and pleasure, or sustains us in weariness, is the foundation to an appreciation of the offer of Christ's life through bread and wine, and of his Spirit through flowing water and sweet-smelling oil. Such gifts of divine beneficence are suited only to a people who find the wonder of a gratuituous plenty in such things as bread, wine, oil and water.

The language of our liturgies can obscure the gift, and obscure the poetry of love. The problems that face our age in feeding on this abundance come from the banality of language that covers the mystery of daily life. We have no eye or ear, nor indeed mouth, for the sacramentality, the gift/abundance of the world on which we dwell, and with which Jesus identifies in giving superabundance. Today, in western liturgy, especially in English, the poverty of its language and expression creates great difficulty for nourishing the spirit from sacramental life. There has been a tension over the last thirty years between the hieratic and the banal. Liturgical renewal has had great virtues. From it have come great gifts, to wit, the availability of the Scriptures to the people, frequent communion at the table of the Lord, the adult catechumenate, fuller participation of all the members of the body in the body of the liturgy. But the efforts at expression have been frequently pedestrian, so that these gains are often countered by the efforts to retrieve the hierarchical and the hieratic.

Nonetheless to an attentive ear or an attentive eye, the poetic creeps through and demands attention: the silence, music that soars, the sight of a God who appears; the touch, smell and feel of things, to the hand, to the mouth, to the nose, to the tongue. It is to this that we listen, as to the small breeze that captured the attention of

Elias at the mouth of the cave. To what is it speaking? Does it speak within the crevices, does it have to do with what is misbegotten in our time? Does the tension between banality and hieratic touch deeper issues and fissions, into which the poetic has crept and from which it seeks to be released?

Stewards at our peril

How deep-seated in the human spirit is the tendency to see stewardship as control is evidenced by the numerous Christian theories that explain Christ's death as a payment, and by Catholic theories that imbue the eucharistic celebration with this same concern. In the Catholic celebration of the eucharist, there has been much more stress on the recompense to be paid to God for sin than on the wonder of the giving of the body and blood to us, for the forgiveness of sins and for an abundant life of the Spirit. Even in arguing against the practice of Sunday communion services without an ordained minister, some today see this as violating the principle that what is to be consecrated is what the community offers to God. Following a journey from symbols of expiatory sacrifice to a felt need for the community to offer their own gifts in order to share fully in what is given to them, we seem to turn away from the gratuitousness and abundance of the gift that God gives us in Jesus Christ, hesitant to accept even this as an out-and-out free gift.

On the other hand, there are those marvellously alert to this bounty. The feminist writer, Julia Kristeva, expresses the gratuitousness and abundance of the divine *agape* very forcefully:

> In the relationship of love, the accent is on its source, God, and not on the creature who loves the creator. For Paul, this even leads to a change of vocabulary: in the human person, the movement of response is *pistis*, faith, not *agape*, love. God loves the first: centre, source, gift, divine love comes to us without merit on our part. Truly speaking, it falls upon us from heaven and imposes itself on us with the imperative of faith . . . *Eros* ascends towards the desired object, towards supreme wisdom. *Agape*, on the contrary, which is identified with God, descends, it is gift, welcome and grace.[4]

As Kristeva puts it in the same article, this is the love which prompted Jesus to immerse himself in death. In those to whom it is offered, it gives rise to hunger, a hunger which in the sacrament of

the eucharist seeks to satisfy itself by eating the Word made flesh of the one who first loved.

The desire to repay imperils the bounty of sacramental gift. It imperils the openness of the gift to all, for it leads to many alienations and divisions. People parcel out the gifts of the earth according to economic laws, moved by economic and political theories, and in a similar way they parcel out the gifts given in sacrament. The gift of the bread and wine, of the body and blood of Christ, is tainted by our desire to be always the givers and the doers. Christ's death has been so often seen as a compensation, a payment of a debt, whereas it is pure abundance, the victory of life in the midst of death, food in which there is an outpouring of Spirit. The overflow of the gift of the table, living by gift/giving, letting the gift flow over, with no sense of keeping or taking back, are the life-forces to which sacramental exchange gives expression. Only in our vulnerability may we sense generosity and ourselves become generous. In face of death, in face of want, in face of enigma, in face of the tensions of life rhythms, there is always Christian liturgy's abundance, an abundance indeed which it owes in great part to the Jewish heritage that it has imbibed. As liturgical tradition shows, no Christian community can truly keep remembrance of Christ without the practice of *diakonia*, that is, without showing care, kindness and love to those in need, through sharing the gifts of the earth. Not only should this mean hospitality to all who approach, but it must also mean reverence for the things of earth shared, and a generous welcome to whatever such gifts come the way of community. This is one of the manifestations and realizations of the gift of the Word and the Spirit to the Church. It is integrated into sacramental worship, not simply something that exists alongside it.

At home with the rhythms of earth and sky

Controlling both the things of earth and the economies of human sharing, our era has created a world in which many are alienated. People are 'divorced' in many ways, from one another, from society, from the earth itself, dwelling as aliens where they are invited to be at home. In such a human order, what does it mean to be gathered together as Christ's disciples around the simple signs of bread, wine, oil and water? How astounding it is for Christ to give us his life, to pour out his life, through these gift actions, actions of giving and receiving, in the power of words of promise and gift! Such promises must needs resonate and sound out with music and poetry in a

world where people come together casually and cannot bond, and do not stay put for very long, in a world that is ethnically and socially divided, alienated, where even the use of words and genders is 'politically correct or incorrect'. It would mean much to our life on earth to be able to take the earth as gift, to dwell with it 'at home', to dwell too in the body with the rhythms of earth and sky. This would be to inhabit the earth that is sanctified by the brooding presence of the Spirit, the earth to which the Word of God has joined itself in the flesh, in a wonderful commerce and exchange.

Changes in cultural perception and cultural communication challenge such sacramental indwelling. The passage from one kind of cultural perception and communication to another raises questions for any society as to how it is to remember its past. Since Christian sacramental memorial has always fitted into overarching cultural modalities and worlds, with these changes the traditional forms of sacrament and of Christian memory are put into question. The remote access and control so plentifully offered, even to children, in the age of the computer makes life more widely known but much less tangible. Hence we need a way of sacramental action and sacramental memory which can negotiate this cultural transition, with its reminder that it is in flowing water, in the smell of oil, in the bread and wine on a table, that humans know each other, and that this bodily and sense-filled access is always indispensable to the nourishment of the human spirit.[5]

Forgetting and remembering

The pasch of Christ, as Johannes Metz has said, is a dangerous memory. It is one that is subversive of the ways in which humans might prefer to think of God and to order their ways of living. It is doubtful, however, that we will see the dangers of this central and irreplaceable memory if we do not see how it is associated with so many other dangerous memories.

Too many historical episodes and realities make it difficult for people to keep a serene and hopeful memory of their past, or of humanity's past. In the century that is coming to its close, humans have lived in a world of forgetting and remembering. One of the reasons why this age is called the postmodern is that there are events that hardly abide remembering, and that when remembered seem to cross out what is more sanguine in a tradition. All exchange at the end of this century is marked by collective forgetting and the counter-efforts at remembering. There are events of which we dare

not speak, and which nonetheless claim to be spoken. They are the events that have so painfully interrupted modernity's sense of progress and control. The closing years of the century and the millennium are marked by a concatenation of apologies for things past and done, that are breaking out of the boundaries of silence placed on them. Many of these events belong to this century, such as the Holocaust of the Jewish people, the Armenian massacres, the gaoling and killing of persons as western colonial powers saw the end of their rule impending, the years of apartheid in South Africa, the discrimination against African Americans in the United States, the subjugation of native peoples in the Americas, the Vietnam War, the Cambodian killing fields, the famine in Somalia, the genocidal strife that washes over the African continent. They pass and are forgotten, but the tale continues to surface, the poetries are written, and the monuments erected.

The claim to any continuity of goodness in the human story is jolted. The desire to make sense of such events is denied. The wish to forget becomes fierce denial. The sense of time and of history are changed. It is difficult to situate any present moment, personal or collective, in an orderly and continuous vision of the human story. We live in time, but the relation between periods of time is obscure.

Christians are confronted by the difficulty of remembering Christ across such events, in which they have been both victims and participants. The Church itself and its liturgies are implicated. Those who keep eucharist did not speak. The Church's own institutions have been used too often to comfort the oppressor and afflict the afflicted. The internal ecclesiastical oppressions, such as that of women and of the colonized on different continents, come to light and cast a shadow over what is proclaimed and celebrated and institutionally supported.

All these memories intrude on sacramental memorial, with their own forms of expression and exchange, though assemblies and codes seem hard put to incorporate them into their litanies of remembering, or into the horizon of the promised resurrection. Sacrament is by definition memorial, but to remember its founding narratives it cannot skip over what is in the memories of those called to be together in Christ, nor the memories which impose themselves so harshly on the human race. All insight into the nature of communication has this context, and sacraments too must needs bring the memorial of Christ's pasch into this context. With the travail of the century, the stories of God and of Christ are dislocated.

They are in need of a place in which to find resonance. They must speak to the tragedy, overcome the forgetting, redress the remembering. The promise of the resurrection, the assurance of the gift given in the cross of Christ, need to be spoken in such a way that they take account of this collapse of modernity and of the remembrance of suffering.

God, our sacraments proclaim, is at the heart of suffering. It is where it is remembered and honoured that the Christ dwells, and calls on his disciples to drink of this chalice. God is in the love which pours self out as gift. Hope is in the 'yes' to the gift and invitation made to those who will not forget, but who take on the task and duty of remembering. Seamus Heaney has spoken and written of a double adequacy of poetry, namely, the adequacy which allows it to address the harsh realities of life as lived, and the adequacy to what is larger and more true than what factually is.[6] For the abundance of sacrament to flow forth, this adequacy will need to fill our sacramental memories.

Conclusion

By way of drawing this article to a close, let me briefly summarize the points that have been considered by way of reflection on the abundance of life offered in sacrament. First, it was recalled that without a poetic sense of earth and life on earth, the language of sacramental gift finds no response. Second, it was noted that those who seek to control life and control the earth cannot be open to what comes to them from pure bounty. Third, it was said that the memory of Christ's great love, and of God's love in Christ, has to be filtered through the memory of human suffering, not indeed to give it meaning but to show that it is there that by divine outpouring the love resides at its most powerful and unsettling. These three pointers may offer a framework within which to reflect further on this abundance.

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NOTES

1 Frank O'Connor, 'An out-and-out free gift', *Collected stories* (New York: Knopf, 1981), pp 537–547.
2 Interview with Seamus Heaney, *Irish American* (May/June 1996), p 28.
3 *Song of the West: selected poems of Georg Trakl*, translated with an introduction by Robert Firmage (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1988), p 7.
4 Julia Kristeva, 'Dieu est agape' in Denoël (ed), *Histoires d'amour* (Paris, 1983), pp 176. The translation is this writer's.
5 European and American communities today seem to generate a somewhat romantic fascination with the rituals of Africa and Asia, with their exuberant sound, their life-filled rhythm, and their splendid colour. Maybe this itself tells us what we ourselves have come to miss. The romance, however, cannot be allowed to make us insensitive to what western culture, and Christianity's own complicity, have stolen from these peoples, and what it has imposed on them even as they make memory. For non-western peoples, 'doomed' to Roman rites, the point is whether they can remember their own cultural history, and whether Christ can find a place within it, taking their gifts so as to make the gift of himself and his remembrance a living thing. This, however, is matter for another discourse.
6 See *Crediting poetry*, The Nobel Lecture (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1995).