The human ways of God

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Introduction

A CENTRAL TEACHING IN THE CATHOLIC TRADITION concerns the incarnation of Jesus Christ, God-made-human. As recorded in the Gospel of John (14:7), Jesus says: 'If you know me, you will know my Father also. From now on you do know him and have seen him.' More generally, it is also Catholic teaching that God is made manifest in all that has been made. There are no immediate revelations of God, but only those which are filtered through some human reality, person or event.[1] So one assumption of this essay is that there is a God and that God speaks to us in human ways.

But there is a further assumption behind this essay. In all that God has made, there is a purpose. God reveals himself in order to accomplish something in his creation. Jesus says to all men and women: 'And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself' (Jn 12:32), an attraction designed to include us in Jesus' own stance before God-Abba. Paul speaks even more inclusively: 'We know that the whole creation has been groaning in labour pains until now; and not only the creation, but we ourselves, who have the first fruits of the Spirit, groan inwardly while we wait for adoption, the redemption of our bodies' (Rom 8:22–23). The purpose is to bring all that God has made into a loving relationship with God and with each other.

These two assumptions certainly apply to the sacramental life of the Church. In the human realities which serve our sacraments, such as water, oil, food and the people assembled, and in the word that is spoken that makes these realities a sacrament,[2] men and women and all creation are addressed and embraced by God. Men and women and all creation are summoned into relationship with God. This is also true of what we call sacramentals: human realities that achieve their own meaning in relation to the sacraments of the Church, such as holy water, oils and ointments attributed to the saints, the Rosary and other ways in which God speaks and embraces creation. But, in the end, these assumptions are true of everything in creation that may summon us into God's presence – a rising sun, a lovely lake, a valley seen from the mountains or a mountain seen from the valley. Everything may reveal

the mystery of God to us, may speak to us and summon us into communion with him.

In addition to these two assumptions, a question must be considered as well. Since Vatican Council II, a great deal of attention has been given to the more properly liturgical life of the Church, such as the eucharist, Christian initiation and various forms of liturgical Christian prayer (the Office). More devotional forms of prayer have been somewhat set aside, such as novenas, benedictions, relics and processions. And yet there seems to be a desire that does not wane for something more than the strictly liturgical to enrich our prayer and express our faith. Private piety has not quite disappeared, and may well be on the upswing again. Thus the question: what is the wisdom that resides in popular piety, and how to distinguish true piety from illusion?

Interpreting human phenomena

Let me begin with four examples. The first comes from a classic place of Catholic piety, the shrine at Lourdes. The second concerns an interpretation which I gave a while back in a Christmas homily. The third was a reply I gave to a woman who claimed to hear voices. The fourth involves my sitting by a lake near a monastery. Each illustrates the ability of creation to speak the presence of God. Each illustrates the purpose of creation to return in love to the creator God. And each shows the tug on the human heart and the difference between reality and illusion.

Example one: a time spent at Lourdes. Even to the sceptic, the shrine at Lourdes announces the holiness of God, the gentleness of God's people, the power of hope spoken in prayer, in the waters of the baths, the shrine of the Virgin and the procession of the Sacrament. From the moment you walk into the shrine itself, you know you are in a place of great peace and great faith. During the evening procession, I kept hearing the phrase from the mass: 'the faith of all your church', a phrase that continues to move me even now.

I remember going into the baths, drinking the water, being dried almost immediately, but much more I remember the look in the eyes of the two who bathed me. In the midst of all the tragedies that gather people to the baths, these two men were like angels standing on guard as the risen One emerged from the tomb. I remember the homily that an Irish priest gave during mass as I watched from the window the people in procession below. He noted the absence of sadness there. 'The sick', he said, 'are the aristocrats at Lourdes. Look at their eyes. This is the miracle of Lourdes.'

Lourdes is not a place where the intellect gets satisfied. But it is a place where hope is very much alive. It is a place of reverence. Each time I go to the cave, I find myself taking off my shoes – 'You are on holy ground'. It is a place where people care for each other. Even the very sick are more concerned for you than for themselves. And it is a place where God cares, and where people together pray that God be praised for all that God has done. Yet for all that, it is a people place. You will never know what is happening there unless you look into the eyes, and the hearts, of those who gather.

Example two: Christmas homily, 1968. I was ordained a deacon in 1968, and was invited to preach at the midnight mass at St Francis Xavier parish in New York City. I learned something about preaching that day. I had been asking, 'What can I say about Christmas?' But the question was not right. And then I remembered what the bishop said when I was presented with the Gospel book: 'Believe what you read, teach what you believe, put into practice what you teach'. The real question was: 'What do I believe about Christmas?'

Two human events took place that Christmas that needed to be brought into my homily. The first was part of the Apollo mission that had several people circulating the moon. The second, in (I think) Cambodia, had liberation forces crossing a bridge. Whatever the exact details of those two events, I spoke of the first as a new beginning for humanity and the beginning of an invitation by God for humans to explore God's universe. I spoke of the second as a mission of peace, to indicate yet again that God is pleased to make his dwelling-place on the earth.

When I spoke of this homily later, someone asked me why I read so much into a mission in space and the crossing of a bridge here on earth. I suggested it was more than poetry, and more than the application of mythology, though it was poetic and it was mythological. The event of Christmas, spoken in the Gospel, spoken in the liturgical celebration and spoken in the infant Child, told of a time of peace and a time when lions and lambs would lie down together. And it spoke of newness, when God has done new things for the human race. Is it too much to see the crossing of a bridge as a summons to peace, and the encircling of the moon a sign of new challenge, new gift, new hope?

Augustine put it very well: when the word is proclaimed on human events, it makes the event a sacrament.

Example three: a woman who hears voices. I was in the sacristy one day when a woman came to speak of the voices she had been hearing. I

listened. I found myself growing somewhat sceptical of the voices, but remembered the great wisdom of Matthew's Gospel:

> 'You will know them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit, but the bad tree bears bad fruit. A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, nor can a bad tree bear good fruit.' (Mt 7:16–18)

So I asked her what her life was like as a result of hearing these voices. Was she more generous or less? Was she kinder or more selfish? Did she thank God for the gift, or was she herself uncertain? Did she love more or did she love less? Her answer was quite stunning. She did indeed give praise to God. She was quite generous, quite caring, quite loving. Neither she nor I was quite clear on the status of these voices, but the effect on her life was most genuine and most enriching. To this day, I do not know whether she heard voices or not, but it does not really matter. Through them, real or imagined, she was approached by God and embraced by God. Through them, real or imagined, something grace-filled had happened in her heart, and God must be pleased because of it.

A final example: sitting by a lake. I made a retreat once at New Subiaco Monastery in Arkansas. Neither I nor the monks knew what I was doing there. But I claimed as a Jesuit I needed to touch base with the Benedictines because Ignatius himself had been formed by Benedictines.

I found in the woods a lovely lake which was most inviting as a place to pray. I was reading *An invitation to John*, by George MacRae[3], and focusing on the phrase, 'we have seen your glory'. Problem was that I could not see his glory. If you can believe this, I, the great lake-lover, sitting by this wonderful lake, had to ask that I might see his glory. Finally it hit me, in my eyes, my ears and my heart: 'Look all around you, Peter. My glory is yours to behold.'

Biblical witness

There are many places in Scripture that support the assumptions and questions of this essay. I have already spoken of Matthew: 'By their fruits you shall know them' (Mt 7:16). The quickest way to understand whether a phenomenon unveils the presence of God is to look at the effect it has on one's life. As mentioned above, I still do not know whether or not she was hearing voices. But the effect of those 'voices' was quite lovely and quite loving.

In addition, let me name three others. Psalm 8 speaks of the wonders of God inviting all people into a song of praise. As the psalmist observes the heavens, the moon and the stars, he wonders why there are human beings and why God cares for them. All creation serves those for whom God cares. All creation speaks and summons us into God's own embrace. 'O Lord, our Sovereign, how majestic is your name in all the earth!' (v 9). In Romans 1:20, Paul asserts: 'Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.' If anyone claims that there is no God, it is because they have looked at the world and seen it as revealing its creator. And in 1 Corinthians 12, Paul contrasts his blindness, by which he followed idols, to the working of the Spirit, who leads him to Christ. 'Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit; and there are varieties of services, but the same Lord; and there are varieties of activities, but it is the same God who activates all of them in everyone' (vv 4–6). God works through all and in all to lead us to himself.

Theological witness

The theological witness continues the tradition that God speaks in and through human realities. Let me mention Augustine, the Scholastics, the *ex opere operato* tradition and the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy of Vatican II.

Augustine is the first to construct a systematic understanding of the symbolic nature of creation. Augustine spoke of 'holy signs', realities that had their own human meaning, but also unveiled a deeper meaning that was invisible. If one penetrated the depth of the sign, it would take one into the realm of God. God was made present through the holy sign; God was drawing us to himself through the holy sign. These *sacramenta*, far more inclusive than the later theology that refined the notion of sacrament to seven, were for Augustine the bridge between the world of the human and the world of the divine.

The Scholastics brought the Augustinian theory into an Aristotelian framework, and sought to understand the relationship between the human and the divine. They operated with two major principles: first, that creation could not be destroyed by its association with the divine and, second, that creation must be redeemed in that association. The divine world could not be reduced to the human world, or the world would not be redeemed. Yet the human world could not simply be destroyed and replaced by some other reality. It would not be redeemed in that case either. The divine world had to be within the human,

transforming the human into itself. One can only reach the divine by taking the human seriously.

In the restricted world, where the number of *sacramenta* had been reduced to seven, it became common to speak of them as being effective simply by being celebrated. 'Sacraments achieve their effect *ex opere operato*'. For all that a lot of theological nonsense has been stirred up by the phrase, its purpose is in fact quite simple. When the human reality is set in motion, the deeper reality of God operates. Through the reality God reveals; through the reality God embraces. God is more eager to do this than we can ever be to thwart it.

A happier understanding of this tradition is set in the *Constitution on the sacred liturgy* of Vatican II. Still speaking of the liturgy, it says: 'In the liturgy human sanctification is signified by signs perceptible to the senses, and is effected in a way which corresponds with each of these signs' (*SC* 7). There is no other way for God to do what Gods intends to do than in and through the human realities that constitute our sacraments. In addition, the reality of sacrament itself has begun to expand beyond the classic seven. The documents speak of the Church as sacrament. The documents speak of Christ as sacrament. The documents speak of the time when all is presented to Christ and through Christ is returned in worship to the Father. All of creation is revealed again as the bridge between the human world and the divine. All of creation is seen again as being prepared as a gift offering to the creator.

The nature of symbol

Sacraments, writ large or writ small, employ symbols, sometimes non-verbal, sometimes verbal, sometimes both. We need to understand the nature of symbol. There are many ways to explore the nature of symbol, some more useful than others. I have found the writings of Paul Ricoeur most helpful to explain the relation between the human and the deeper realities which the human reality conveys.[4]

Every symbol has two levels of meaning. The first, for example, would be the meaning of a shared meal, its ability to nourish and unite those who take part in it. The second is the deeper meaning that allows this meal to present again another meal, the Last Supper, and the reality of the cross which the meal also represents. A symbol is born when a human reality is able to express something deeper, or when something deeper can only be expressed through the first level of meaning. For Ricoeur, all of creation is potentially a symbol.

In every symbol, the second level of meaning is available only through the first level. The second level cannot be understood apart

from the first. As Ricoeur names it, you must walk in the aura of the symbol's first meaning in order to grasp what lies within it.

Interpreting a symbol

Ricoeur says that a symbol gives rise to thought. But this is not simply an issue of thinking about the symbol – as in 'what did it mean?' The process of interpreting the symbol is more complex and more challenging. The first step is what may be called symbol association. Symbols may be understood in terms of their relation to other symbols, each shedding light on the other. The more powerful the associations, the richer the meaning that will be unveiled. The second step brings the interpreter into the picture. What does all this mean to *me*? This kind of existential appropriation is absolutely necessary if the symbol is to be engaged and not merely 'thought about'.

The third step leads to thought, but there are two kinds of thought which Ricoeur has in mind. One is towards clarity – what does this symbol mean? The other is toward speculation – what might this symbol mean? A symbol both reveals and conceals. The level of clarity seeks what is revealed; speculation seeks what is not yet obvious. All this feeds the imagination from the outside, seeking one final step: consent. One must consent to what is presented and so internalize what is revealed. Then one can go back to the symbol again, either to enjoy what has been internalized or to start the process over again.

Building on the affections

The process of interpreting a symbol involves the symbol itself, the action that might follow the engagement of the symbol, and an appeal to the affections to summon one to give consent. One does not choose what is not presented as attractive to the affections. Affections allow consent. Affections allow the human follow-up of that consent.[5]

When we are dealing with devotion, it is essential to keep track of one's affections. The battle between good and evil takes place in the realm of affection. The challenge of Christian initiation is always the victory of the good over the evil, and the realm of the affections is where God's grace is operative. The summons of God, whether it comes through the Word, through actions such as a meal or a bath, or from the many bits of creation that may serve as sacrament, is a summons to the affections of the heart.

In the motion picture *Beckett*, a young monk who had earlier tried to kill Beckett was again set in relation to him. His attitude had not changed; he still saw the bishop as a fraud, a political tool, an imposter.

As he is leaving the room, the bishop goes to pray, and the monk hears him. He is presented with a radically different image – a man of prayer, not a political tool. He goes to the bishop rather than away from him. He embraces the bishop, rather than fleeing from him. In the world of affection, he has moved from hatred to love.

Authenticity, legitimacy and discernment

Since what is at stake here are issues of the human heart, a question might well be asked how authentic and legitimate the claims on the heart might be. It is possible that the claims might lead you to totally inappropriate behaviour, and these could not come from God even if God was originally seen to be their source. The saying from Matthew quoted above still holds: 'By their fruits you shall know them.' Looking at one's subsequent behaviour is one source of discernment.

A second would be to consider the nature of the image or symbol itself. The reason why there must be an association of a given symbol with other symbols is not simply to enrich the force of the symbol. It is also to provide a corrective. By itself, for example, water allows many interpretations, such as inclusion by immersion, liberation as in 'freedom from' . . ., cleansing and nourishment. Linking the water to the symbols of a biblical tale may allow it to invite one kind of response, while linking it to the symbols of a different kind of tale may invite a radically other kind of response. The symbol that reveals the presence of God must convey the desires of God, because those symbols are designed to invite you into the desires of God.

The connection between image (or symbol), affection and behaviour is a wonderful source of discernment. A rich image is required to present the desires of God, and a healthy and holy style of behaviour will flow from the desires of God – but only if the desires of God enfold and embrace our own desires in the process.

It need not be said that there are a whole set of emotions involved in the exercise of private devotion. It is for this reason that the person should never fear to discuss what is happening. Conversation with another will be most helpful in discernment. It may give you support in the images that you follow. Or it may provide other images to guide or correct them. It may support you in the behaviour that follows or it may suggest other ways to follow the God who is approaching you. And if the other is very wise, she or he will also know the desires of God and be a challenge and a blessing for what is happening to you.

God uses and transforms human realities

Which takes us back to the two assumptions of this essay. God uses human realities to speak to us. God uses human realities to embrace us. God uses human realities to transform us. God continues the act of creation through creation itself. And God is involved in this act of creation, both as originator and the one who sustains it, on the one hand, and as final source and goal, on the other. God has designs on his creation.

Creation was established, not to float aimlessly nor simply to achieve its own status as creation. It was created in love in order to return in love to its creator.[6] This ongoing engagement with God is finally what we humans are about. But the only love we can offer is human love. And the only way we can offer love is through the world as we know it.

Perhaps four sentences from John's Gospel say it all. They tell us why God must work through human hands, and why only human hands can offer praise and thanks to God. They tell us why God must speak to human ears, and why only the human voice can offer praise and thanks to God. They come from the Prologue.

> The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world (1:9) . . . But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (1:12) . . . And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth (1:14) . . . No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known (1:18).

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NOTES

1 'God, who through the Word creates all things and keeps them in existence, gives men enduring witness to Himself in created realities,' Constitution on Divine Revelation, 3.

2 This definition of Augustine is cited many times. This one is from the *Introduction to the Sacraments*, by John P. Schanz (New York: Pueblo, 1983), p 69. Schanz says: 'If we take St Augustine as a kind of spokesman for the end of the early period of patristic tradition, we cannot fail to note his famous expression concerning sacraments that when "the word is added to the element we have a sacrament."' The text itself is from *In Joannis Evangelium*, 80, 3: PL 35, 1840.
3 New York: Image, 1978.
4 A full treatment of Ricoeur's understanding of symbol may be found in *The symbolism of evil*, E. Buchanan (trans) (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969). A more modest version is in 'The Hermeneutics of Symbols and Philosophical Reflection', *International Philosophical Quarterly* 2, May 1962, pp 191–218.
5 Don Saliers treats the religious role of affections in *The soul in paraphrase: prayer and the religious affections* (New York: Seabury-Crossroad, 1980).
6 See 'The Personal Universe', in *Persons in relation*, by John Macmurray (Atlantic Highlands: Humanities Press, 1979 [orig 1961]), pp 206–224.