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SP = Statement on Sacramental Practices

Symbolising Presence: Beyond Water, Bread, and Wine

Our Presence to God's Presence

Fundamental to the *Statement on Sacramental Practices* is an understanding of the workings of symbol and ritual. The guidelines suggest a ritual that enables a community celebration of the sacraments to symbolise the community's dedication to "participating in the inbreaking reign of God." (SP 3.5) This use of ritual *convokes* the redeemed people of God into the body of Christ and demands that at the eucharist all the baptised gather and participate in being "signs and testimonies of God's will toward us." (SP 2.5) For example, children are included at eucharist because if the eucharist our Holy Communion symbolises the Reign of God, then all the baptized are a part of the heavenly banquet. Too often, sacramental practice has ritualized the sacraments, i.e. a few drops of water on the head of an infant, communion rarely because of stringent legalistic requirements, and/or the adherence to usages and policies which disembodied the ritual action from the experience of the individual and the community, i.e. communion performed by the pastor rather than a sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving offered by the community. The guidelines in the new Statement allow ritual to be a means for enabling *symbolizing* rather than avoiding it.

To baptize with a few drops of water on the head of an infant, without the presence of the community of the baptized, or to conduct communion as an appendix to the liturgy of the Word, or to regard the sacraments as the "pastor's thing" requiring only passive involvement by the congregation, reduces *sacramental experience*. Sacraments are reduced to being instruments "dishing out" grace rather than symbols of God's presence heralding our participation in the new age: the reign of God.

To be present to God's presence in the sacraments calls for *participatio*. The assembly celebrates the sacraments with the celebration presided over by "one whose ministry originates within and is affirmed by the whole church" (SP 6.2). Gathering to celebrate God's mighty acts in Christ convokes redemptive unity. Gathered and celebrating, a community begins to symbolise: the assembly crosses over from common ground to holy ground. The faithful follow Jesus into the "Holy of Holies;" moving beyond our things to God's things, we encounter God. Sacramental symbols enable our participation, in order to move us from our reality to God's reality.

Such movement calls forth our *humanity*. Being drawn beyond water, bread and wine and into the presence of God confronts each individual with the barriers hindering community. Often celebration becomes routinised and rituals are used in devious ways. For example, the sharing of the Peace may ritualise distance rather than community (one body of Christ) and a ministry of reconciliation (cf, SP 3.31. A ritual handshake (or even hug) can define a border. The action uses as shaking hands in business to signal polite distance. The gesture can fabricate community because the community deludes itself into believing that the ritual creates a reconciled and gathered community. Simply going through the motions—*doing* ritual—fails to acknowledge the pain and vulnerability which make us human. Sacramental symbols seek to humanise ritual; ordinary human things become carriers of grace (in contrast to ordinary things being instrumental to the conveyance of grace).

Because they seek to humanise, sacramental symbols are more dangerous than is ritual. Symbols of grace challenge us to clarify and examine our perceptions of self as well as the way we perceive others. Out of our humanity, God redeems us; sacramental symbols evoke a new communal and individual commitment to God's Kingdom. Not yet fully redeemed, not yet beyond our humanity, we symbolise a new creation and in that new creation interpret things differently. From our very humanness we respond to God's presence. Ritual deals with explaining our response: do we want to be present to God's presence? Do we mean what we do? Human things—water, bread, wine commit us to "continuing God's mission in the world and sharing in the hope of the world to come." (SP 3.3) Honest symbolising engages us to "experience anew the creative and redemptive acts of God, receive the gift of the presence of Christ, and look forward in anticipation to our future with God." (SP 5.6)

The Sacramental Concern: "Why?"

Statement on Sacramental Practices puts forth the challenge to individuals and the community to be present to God's presence. In a sacrament an encounter takes place: we experience the reality of God's new creation in Jesus Christ. The sacraments challenge the baptised to confront their experience and to "imitate the example of our Lord who is both host and servant and to embody and reflect the unity which the Lord's Supper symbolises." (SP 5.7) God establishes the new creation in Jesus Christ. If then we engage the presence of Christ by opening up the self to God's transforming power, we move beyond doing ritual actions (ritualization) and our life and experience in this present creation become connected to the new creation.

Thinking symbolically causes us then to ask the question "Why?" We gather to initiate a new member with water; we celebrate the presence of the Reign of God with bread and wine. *Statement on Sacramental Practices* encourages us to extend ourselves beyond water, beyond bread and wine into a people of God. Asking "why?" at baptism and at eucharist challenges our intentions with these symbols. Are we present, being transformed by God, intending community and sanctification? Unfortunately, all too often, "How" is the sacramental concern. "How" examines the instruments: How might God work through water or enter into bread and wine, i.e. with what words (e.g. "In the night...") does Christ become present. "How" loses energy; there is no transformation because there is no stretching beyond present things into God's future.

Sacramental symbols act as bridges between our reality and the ultimate reality of God's Reign. As we gain *symbolic competency*, we increasingly participate in the "inbreaking reign of God." Symbolic competency is the ability to link our ordinary, human experience with our experience of the new creation instituted by Christ. It means realising the purpose of our baptism, so aptly expressed in Section 3.3 (*vide supra*). When we become alienated from the calling of our baptism, separated from experiencing the body of Christ, we tread the boundary between symbol and ritual. Rituals then become means to escape from honest participation in the community of the baptised. Ritualising our sacraments substitutes our intentions for God's intentions. We escape from participating in the new creation. For example, if we approach the eucharist symbolically, our emphasis lies in the encounter with Christ and the transforming power that such a meeting has. It "compels us to imitate the example of our Lord who is both host and servant and to embody and reflect the unity which the Lord's Supper symbolises" (SP 5.7). Ritualising as a means of escape, approaches the sacraments in an abstract, rational way. Ritualising affirms, "we've always done it this way." Such an affirmation refuses to allow our human experience any linkage to God who is calling forth a new creation, a new age, a new Reign.

Symbolising God's Presence

In alienating ourselves from our experience, we forget that no amount of instruction or "preparation" will ever suffice to encounter Christ's presence in bread and wine. Only symbol can adequately deal with our complex experiences: ultimately we cannot be prepared, we cannot deliver what is demanded, and we cannot overcome with "forget it." Ritualising escapes the challenge of our experiences because the "way we've always done it" does not ask "why we are doing what we do?" *Statement on Sacramental Practices* concerns itself with "why?" Being Called In Baptism to "dedicate ourselves to participating in the inbreaking reign of God" prepares us for a community celebrating the presence of Christ "in every time and place" (cf. SP 5.5). To do that, all the baptised must gather in community letting the presence of Christ, "in, under, and with" them, transform their experiences and gather them into the Kingdom of God. When the always-unprepared community gathers together, broken, and in need of redemption, its people acknowledge God's presence. The gathered community symbolises Christ's presence transforming lives in Baptism and Holy Communion. The community, as the body of Christ, symbolises the very thing it receives: the body of Christ.

Such a life links the banal and ordinary with God's mission in the world. Ordinary human situations become moments of transformation. A Christian community, symbolising the body of Christ (SP 3.3), links traditional symbols of water, bread, and wine to the experience of God's reconciliation when these sacramental symbols convoke us to redemptive unity. Symbol always includes action: immersing in water or praying over and eating bread and wine. In Baptism "water is used generously" (SP 4.2), and actions such as presentation, thanksgiving, laying on of hands, signing with the cross and welcome are ordinary to the celebration (SP 4.5). Our celebration of the sacramental meal roots itself in a community which gathers at the table (cf. SP 5.4, 5.5, 5.7): "In the Eucharist, Christ gathers, teaches and nourishes the people of God. It is these gathered people of God who celebrate the Eucharist" (SP 6.1). The "Practical Principles" for Holy Communion assist in symbolising that God's presence alone redeems our experience (cf. esp. SP 6.1, 6.2, 6.4, 6.5, 6.9, 6.11, 6.12, 6.13, 6.14, 6.19, 6.20).

If we are to symbolise and not just engage in ritual then the assembly, individually and corporately, needs to deepen the meaning and value of its experiences. As Section 6.11 points out, "Preparation for the sacrament does not make one worthy to receive the sacrament" but personal preparations are encouraged (SP 6.11) because they structure our experiences, i.e. how we pick-up on God in our personal lives. We are encouraged not simply to come to the sacraments "like we've always done" but rather to reframe experiences and tell the story in a new manner. To "mean what you do" demands asking of oneself and the community: "Why: Why are we doing this like this?" To appropriate the story of redemption in a new manner effects healing. *Statement on Sacramental Practices* challenges framing Christian ritual from the top down, from mind to soul, as intellectual rather than physical. Note the practical points at Sections 4.2, 4.5, 4.9, 4.10, 6.2, 6.4, 6.9, 6.11, 6.12, 6.17, 6.19, 6.20, 6.23, 6.24.

God's Presence and Our Presence

Statement on Sacramental Practices provides guidelines which reframe our practice of the sacraments in order to symbolise God's presence and our presence. Responsible presence on our part depends on our awareness that in our life story, we always know more than we tell. Being present to God's redeeming power requires more than just peeking out from behind an assumed role. Being present involves restructuring the way we tell the story of our lives before God and the community. Sacramental symbols contest our fragmented presence and evoke new communal and individual commitment to God's Reign.

The sacramental symbols—water, bread and wine—do nothing alone, as instruments in and of themselves. It is what we, the gathered community, do with water, with bread and wine, that allows God's transforming grace to be effective. The ritual of the liturgy either enables us to encounter Christ through symbol or escape from our baptismal calling; presence or absence; encounter or escape. *Statement on Sacramental Practices* seeks that we symbolise with these "testimonies of God" and receive the gift of God's presence. The symbols are reliable; how reliable are our celebrations?

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