

**Critically discuss the various images and symbols which are involved in the Christian ritual of the Eucharist/Mass, with specific reference to theoretical writing on image/symbol/ritual/eucharist.**

"Rabbi Yoshua ben Levi came upon Elijah the prophet while he was standing at the entrance of Rabbi Simeron ben Yohai's cave ... He asked Elijah, "When will the Messiah come?" Elijah replied, "Go and ask him yourself."

"Where is he?"

"Sitting at the gates of the city."

"How shall I know him?"

"He is sitting among the poor covered with wounds. The others unbind all their wounds at the same time and then bind them up again. But he unbinds one at a time and binds it up again, saying to himself, 'Perhaps I shall be needed: if so I must always be ready so as not to delay for a moment.'" (From the tractate Sanhedrin, cited in Nouwen, 1994, 82)

The above extract from the tractate Sanhedrin describes a Jewish understanding of the Messiah. It is used here as a description of the work of Christ as Messiah, as understood by Christians. Through this story, Jesus can be seen as a healer, indeed a wounded healer. His passion is to bring life and wholeness to other wounded people. As Nouwen says, "Jesus has given this story a new fullness by making his own broken body the way to health, to liberation and new life. ... Jesus [makes] his wounds into a major source of healing power." In considering how symbols and images function within the Christian

ritual of the Eucharist, it will be essential to understand that at its heart, it is a celebration of the salvific nature of Christ's death. The sacramental materials of bread and wine are the chief symbols and they represent Christ's body and blood. As the book of Peter in Chapter 2 verse 24 puts it, 'He personally carried away our sins in his own body on the cross so we can be dead to sin and live for what is right. You have been healed by his wounds!' It is this healing that is accessed by believers via the Eucharist celebration. Jesus Christ first instituted what the Christian Church now calls the Eucharist, or Holy Communion. Reading the biblical narrative (e.g. Matthew 26: 17-30), it seems that Jesus main reason for doing so was 'remembrance'. He served those in the 'Upper Room' the bread and wine, saying that they 'were' his body and blood. Whether or not he meant this literally has not been without dispute. This, it is not supposed, decreases its effectiveness as a means of remembrance. The associations of bread and wine with the body and blood of Christ are therefore the most commonly used, and constitute what Mobsby calls the 'official sign value'. (2004, 3)

The following quote from the Article entitled 'The Sacrament of the Eucharist' illustrates an aspect of the Roman Catholic Church's position on the Eucharistic celebration: 'The Eucharist is the efficacious sign and sublime cause of that communion in the divine life and that unity of the People of God by which the Church is kept in being. It is the culmination both of God's action sanctifying the world in Christ and of the worship men offer to Christ and through him to the Father in the Holy Spirit.' (The Catechism of the Catholic Church, art. 3) It is therefore understood that for the believer, the Eucharist, as a sacrament, provides an impartation of something 'other'. Dillistone

describes a Platonic understanding of 'sacrament' saying, 'through sacraments man could penetrate to the inner spiritual world and receive grace therefrom for his spiritual life.' (1985, 15) Therefore, in this essay the term sacrament will chiefly be understood as that which gives access to spiritual enlightenment, 'otherness', or 'grace'. Symbols, it will be seen, play a key role in the sacramental nature of the Eucharist.

Dillistone cites Tillich when he affirms the symbolic nature of the sacramental materials: 'The sacramental material is not a sign but a symbol. As symbols the sacramental materials are intrinsically related to what they express; they have inherent qualities (water, fire, oil, bread, wine) which make them adequate to their symbolic function and irreplaceable.' (1986, 123) To use the example of wine, which primarily represents the blood of Christ, its red colour and liquid form - inherent qualities - make it adequate to its symbolic function. Bread is food and therefore provides sustenance for the body. This inherent quality makes it adequate to symbolise the sustaining nature of Christ's death for the believer. In saying that symbols play a key role in the sacramentality of the Eucharist, it is important to recognise their wider significance as the ultimate nature of all human thinking. 'Symbol is the slogan, the magic key which opens all doors and answers all questions. In symbolism, all our thinking comes to rest.' (Foss cited in Dillistone, 1985, 12)

Having established the sacramental nature of the Eucharist, and the symbolic nature of the sacramental, we will now proceed to define the nature of symbols, and religious ones in particular. The working definition of symbols used in this essay will be taken from Empereur.

He defines them as 'a sensible reality which renders present to and involves a person subjectively in a transforming experience of the mystery of transcendence by means of a community.' (1987, 36) Let us now distinguish the nature of symbols from the related terms 'sign' and 'signal'. The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship describes the chief function of signs, saying that they 'provide information, accumulate fact, and assemble accurate data. ... Signs do not open large new vistas of knowledge or experience, they are primarily functional and pragmatic.' Signals are a further development of signs in that they 'reveal a surplus of meaning beneath and beyond the sign itself ...' Or in other words, 'A signal is a sign whose significance has been stretched by the presence of additional information or insight not provided by the sign itself.' (Mitchell N. 2002, 438) For example, brown tree leaves lying on the ground are a sign that the leaves are dead. They are however also a signal that autumn has come. The sign of dead leaves becomes a signal of autumn because of the 'presence of additional information not provided by the sign itself.' As this example makes clear, all signals are also signs. Similarly, all symbols are also essentially signs. 'Symbols, then, are concretely composed of signs. ...In themselves, ... candles are signs. ... The lighted candle is a symbol insofar as fire is a natural symbol. In a special liturgical context ... the candle becomes a human and Christian symbol'. (Empereur, 1987, 38) The following quote makes these differences clear: 'A symbol is neither information (sign) nor triggering surplus/stimulus (signal); it is an action that discloses new and unexpected relationships.' (Mitchell, 2002, 439)

To quote the 'Church Father' Thomas Aquinas, 'Signum (symbols) are directed toward human beings, who use them to proceed from what is

known to what is unknown.' (Cited in Mitchell, 2002, 438) This has been expressed differently by Dillistone when discussing the thought of Tillich, positing that 'For him the highest characteristic of the symbol was to open up new dimensions in Reality and in the beholding subject.' (1986, 128) So it seems that symbols are by their nature creative and insightful, and, in line with our definition, subjectively experienced. This ability to open new dimensions is due to the fact that symbols not only point to the 'other', but actually 'render present' the 'mystery of transcendence'. (Empereur, 1987, 36) This has been characterized by others as the 'numinous effect' (Dupre, 2000, 23) and is the means by which the worshipper may have what our working definition calls 'a transforming experience'. (Empereur, 1987, 36) Dupre makes some helpfully practical descriptions of how the nature of symbols encourages the percipient to access the numinous content: 'By paradoxical phrasing, distorted forms, unusual settings, they warn us that we must entirely surpass the empirical appearance in order to gain access to their inexpressible content.' (2000, 6) To use the example of bread, it is obviously a very plain and everyday substance, but seeing it in the unusual setting of the Eucharist ritual, the percipient is made aware of its immediate relation to the sacrifice of Christ. By means of the liturgical prayers and symbolic scripture readings, the percipient is opened up to new ways of understanding Christ, as he is 'rendered present to them'. In this way, they move to a deeper level of perception, from what is 'known to what is unknown'. (Aquinas as cited by Mitchell, 2002, 438) This is the crux point of the 'transforming experience' cited by Empereur. The prayers, scripture reading, and the rites of the word and the Eucharist all take place within the overall context of the liturgy. Empereur calls this 'the articulation of the spirituality of a community', and says that all the

different symbols within the liturgy are not independent of each other, but 'make up the sentences of the paragraph we call the liturgy'. (1987, 45)

One may still find themselves asking 'Why symbols?' We will now give consideration to the necessity of the human dependence upon symbols. Mobsby expresses the innate human urge to symbolize: 'We do not live in a world but a picture of it, and therefore as human beings we look all the time for imaginative symbolic ways of expressing meaning in the worldviews we hold. These world-views or 'symbol systems' represent the structure of reality and are therefore models of reality.' (2004, 4) We will at a later stage address in greater detail this function of symbols, as creating worldview. Echoing Foss's conclusions stated above, Dupre offers further explanation: 'Because of its embodied existence, the mind is intrinsically dependent on sensuous forms. Symbols, then, are not arbitrary devices which the mind may either employ or forego. They are as essential to its expression as the body is to its existence.' (2000, 3) It would also seem to be part of the nature of faith itself that requires the use of symbols. 'Faith is never an immediate feeling or emotion. It is the awareness of a transcendent dimension to all the experiences of life, the affirmation of a deeper *reality* underlying the obvious appearances.' (Dupre, 2000, 4) In the context of the Eucharist ritual, the obvious appearance of the bread and wine must be surpassed in order to access this faith-enriching 'experience of the transcendent'. This would correlate with Tillich's (cited by Dillistone - see above) thought that the chief function of symbols is to 'open new dimensions in reality'.

There seems also to be a great sense of freedom and potential made accessible by the intrinsically 'inexhaustible' (Mitchell, 2002, 440) nature of symbols: 'Liberated from the actuality of perception the future is no longer tied to the past in rectilinear determination. As a result of the minds escape from the immediate present, the future becomes a genuine possibility.' (Dupre, 2000, 5) Cassirer has gone into more depth in relation to the renewing and liberating characteristics of symbols, affirming that they have the capacity to jolt us into life and action, bequeathing the ability to 'reshape [our] human universe'. (Cited in Dillistone, 1986, 122) Dillistone assures us also that to 'see a scene or to hear a message as symbolic of something far greater and more enduring can be the way of true freedom', and warns that the alternatives of 'plain interpretation and literal correspondences', can 'beget narrowness and exclusiveness.' (Dillistone, 1985, 9) To many this would seem to contradict the traditionally 'dogmatic' approach to theology that the church has long espoused. To this author, it seems that the Eucharistic symbols have survived only because they were so clearly instituted by Christ. It would also follow that they are one of the main reasons that the Church has survived, acting still to many a source life. Indeed in the excerpt from the Catechism of the Roman Catholic Church at the outset of this piece, the Eucharist is described as the 'cause of ... communion in the divine life'. Perhaps it is the essentially symbolic nature of the Eucharist that enables it to defy the 'narrowness and exclusiveness' that Dillistone warns us of.

As has been inferred, the Eucharist celebration is a ritual. This is by virtue of its being performed in a set, ordered and ceremonial manner. We may now ask, 'What is the purpose of ritual?' Having established

that rituals are themselves inherently symbolic (2000, 12), Dupre says that the primary purpose of ritual is to 'bestow meaning' upon 'ordinary action' by 'placing it in a higher perspective'. (2000, 13) He further posits that ordinary action 'obtains a salvific effect which it did not possess in an ordinary, non-symbolic situation, and which is somehow directly connected to the action.' (2000, 23) Again, this verifies the working definition established at the outset of this essay, affirming that the ultimate motivation for engaging in religious symbols is to be involved in a sacramental and 'transforming experience of divine transcendence.' Dupre continues to make clear that the transforming experience or 'numinous effect' of the rite is not a direct consequence of the rite, in and of itself, 'Rather does the rite partake in a transcendent reality from which it derives an efficacy surpassing its ordinary power.' (2000, 23) Taft comments on the symbolic role of liturgy in the ritual context, saying that it allows for encounter and experience with God, therefore creating an experience of salvation in the present. (Taft, 1993, 340) Ritual can also be understood to elicit deeper meaning upon historical events. Dupre sights Mircea Eliade's description of the meaning of religious rites, saying that they in some sense are a refreshing of the primordial events which brought us into existence. He is also quick to point out that many rites, particularly those from 'historic' faiths such Islam, Judaism and Christianity, although they have factual, historical precedents, they are so much more than just ritualized reenactments. Ritual, he says bequeaths a larger and more lasting significance upon the historic event. (2000, 19) Reflecting upon the longevity and relative vitality of Christianity in many parts of the world, it must be concluded that ritual is indeed a source of much strength to it. As we

shall see next, ritual also helps to construct and inform the worldview of the participant.

Having established the main purpose of symbolic ritual within the context of the Eucharist, and indeed the symbolic nature of all human thought (See Foss, above) let us now consider how it functions within community. Dillistone expresses its importance, as related to that of symbols, succinctly: 'Traditional symbols are essential for holding together successive generations and achieved values within any particular culture.' (1986, 122) Dupre addresses the role of ritual similarly here, making the relationship with symbol explicit: 'As all symbols, rites structure, articulate, and support the life experience. ...They are conceived to *determine* ordinary experience and to interpret it.' (2000, 12) Taft describes how ritual, and specifically, a symbolic patterning of time, helps to build and enforce worldview. He sees daily worship and the patterning of ritual as a living metaphor of the salvific effect of relationship with the divine. By means of the symbolic, evocative and worldview-forming nature of ritual, people respond by living out a practical expression of faith. (1993, 341) Dupre notes that one of the key features of ritual is its communality. He says, 'Its structural activity is always for the group, never for the isolated individual. Through participating in the same structuring activities men become aware of their essential togetherness.' (2000, 18)

In conclusion, we have seen that the Eucharist is sacramental, in that provides encounter with the divine and therefore an impartation of grace, or numinous. Symbols play a key role in the ability of sacraments to provide this impartation. Symbols are related to the

role of signs and signals, but are chiefly distinguished by their ability to 'do or give what it embodies'. (Mitchell, 439) We have further seen how humans are essentially dependant upon the use of symbols for 'all our thinking'. (Foss cited in Dillistone, 1985, 12) Ritual, being at heart symbolic, gives meaning to the world as we subjectively experience it, by helping to construct our 'worldview'. It also draws the participant into transforming experiences of the divine or 'numinous'.

Word

count:

2737

## Reference List

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, n.d., *Article 3, The Sacrament of the Eucharist*, retrieved on 2/1/06 from <http://198.62.75.1/www1/CDHN/euch1.html#EUCHARIST>.

Dillistone, F.W., 1985, *Christianity and Symbolism*, SCM, London.

Dillistone, F.W., 1986, *The Power of Symbols*, SCM, London.

Dupre, L., 2000, *Symbols of the Sacred*, Eerdmans, Grand Rapids.

Empereur, J., 1987, *Exploring the Sacred*, Pastoral Press, Washington.

Mitchell, N., 2002 'Sign, Symbol' in P.F. Bradshaw (ed.), *The New SCM Dictionary of Liturgy and Worship*, SCM, London.

Mobsby, I., 2004, *Christian Worship and Human Community*, retrieved 6/01/06 from <http://www.moot.uk.net/foundation.htm>

Nouwen, H., 1994, *The Wounded Healer*, DLT, London.

Taft, R., 1993, *The Liturgies of the Hours in East and West*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville.