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# The future of Catholic sacramental life

Bernard Cooke | Jun. 17, 2013
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*[**Editor's note:**This story originally appeared in the Nov. 10, 1995, issue of NCR.Bernard Cooke[1], an educator who foresaw the need for well-formed lay theologians, died May 31, 2013, in San Antonio. He was 91.]*

What is the state of Catholic sacramental life and what is its future? Are we, as some fear, drifting toward an evangelical form of Christianity that abandons the emphasis on ritual that has been distinctive of the Catholic tradition? While one can appreciate such worries, the recent series of NCR reports on sacramental practice in the United States suggests that unprecedented development rather than disaster can be our future.

Catholic celebration of sacramental rituals has undergone obvious change, but it seems quite clear that creative and concerned communities of Catholics have maintained a strong continuity with their liturgical past even as they introduced new life into what had often become routine religious services. Moreover, these bright spots on the liturgical landscape are not spiritual hideaways, comfortably isolated from the concerns and needs of the surrounding world; instead, liturgical vitality seems to be closely interwoven with social concern.

Still, there is a pervasive sense of crisis and widespread unease. People question what is happening. Increasing shortage of ordained leaders of liturgy is an important factor in the present situation, but other forces are at work in what may be the most important shift in Christian life in centuries. What is shifting is the presupposition of liturgy, our understanding of salvation, of grace, of God's action in human life, of sin and forgiveness, indeed of the very nature of Christianity.

**New Testament impact**

The shift is a further step in the radical and still unrealized sociocultural revolution that occurred in Jesus of Nazareth, so it is not surprising that the catalyst -- perhaps the most important catalyst -- in today's developments has been the impact of the New Testament on Catholic thinking and life. While massive cultural changes in our world, perhaps most important the movement of women toward equality, are without a doubt profoundly influencing the Christian community, the most basic force inviting Christians to a renewed faith and hope has been Christ's own Spirit, the Spirit of prophecy and life to which the New Testament literature bears witness.

If one examines the gospels to answer the question, "What was distinctive in Jesus' teaching about religion?" what one discovers is his emphasis on the inner attitudes of people. He did not decry regular religious practice, but he did not see it as of ultimate importance. He made it clear that what mattered most was what was in people's hearts. So, too, it is the stress on genuineness of sacramental experience, on people's understanding and commitment, that seems to be at the center of the liturgical shift today. The instances of "success" in the preceding articles point clearly in this direction.

For centuries a quasi-magical mentality crept into Christian sacramental practice. Even though official and

theological explanations of ex opere operato insisted that sacramental rituals gave grace dependent upon the dispositions of the recipients and that sacramental effectiveness was not magic, the ordinary perception of people was that grace was mysteriously controlled and dispensed by those empowered through ordination.

As a matter of fact, the focus of people for the most part was not on grace as a creative and transforming reality in their lives; rather the focus was on human sinfulness and on the divine forgiveness they hoped would be granted through "receiving the sacraments."

Obsession with sin had marked much of Christian history, but several things happened to change this outlook: The atrocities and massive human suffering accompanying this century's wars, the Jewish Holocaust at the hands of the Nazis, the threat of nuclear destruction of the planet, all put "sin" in perspective. Psychological research brought into question the dynamics of human motivation and guilt. While certainly not the first ones to discover that humans are persons, 20th century personalist thinkers did draw attention to the personal dimension of women and men. As a result, sin has come to be viewed less as "an offense against God" and more in terms of culpable irresponsibility and infidelity to relationships.

As notions of sin changed, so did the understanding of grace. Somewhere around midcentury the focus of theological reflection moved from "actual grace" to "sanctifying grace," and grace is being viewed more as transformation of humans as humans. At the root of this shift was the awareness that the great grace is the saving and transforming presence of God; the great grace is God-for-us. So when one speaks of the sacramental rituals "giving grace," one is talking about the transformation of people that takes place because of God's presence in the risen Christ and their Spirit.

**Sharing in mystery**

Although Catholics in the pews may not be that reflectively aware of these changes in explaining sin and grace, they are quite aware that "church" does not mean what it used to. Hazy though the notion may still be for many, there is common awareness that the church is the people of God, that all the baptized, and not just the ordained, share in mission and ministry and therefore in responsibility for the church and the world. This is beginning to move Catholics toward realizing that sacraments are not something they "receive"; rather, sacraments are actions they do, active professions of their faith. The Eucharist in particular is no longer unquestioningly viewed as "Father's thing."

So what principles of liturgical practice can guide us as we strive to go further with genuine ritual reform? First, we must keep in mind that our sacramental rituals, because they are symbols, are effective, "give grace," precisely the way symbols are effective and not in some hidden fashion. That means people must understand what is happening, and people must do the ritual actions, not observe them. If rituals are done this way they have the power to form community, to give meaning to the life of individuals and groups, to provide structures that change as life changes and truly to speak the presence of God among us, that is, be sacrament.

Second, in sacramental rituals, the Eucharist above all, two meanings of life are meant to converge: the meaning that comes from the dying and rising of Jesus and the meaning that the gathered women and men have given their daily lives. Those lives are meant to give practical down-to-earth meaning to the gospel and the gospel is meant to confront the understandings of life people already have. As this happens, people are challenged to conversion, to accept discipleship and active involvement as individuals and communities in the mission of Christ.

Third, to say that the significance of daily life is meant to interact ritually with the word of meaning revealed in Jesus is to imply that daily life is itself revelatory, that the ordinary stuff of our experience is sacramental. Discovering this, that the "ordinary" has importance, that God works in and through "the ordinary," that saving grace occurs in what is seen and heard and felt and not in some hidden world of mysteries -- knowing and

appreciating this is already working to change Christians' ritual practice.

However, for this insight to transform our liturgy as it should, sacramental rituals must become celebrations of the Christian meaning of life as it is lived by a diversity of people in a diversity of cultures and a diversity of circumstances. We must be free to celebrate liturgies that "tell it as it is," liturgies that honor and preserve the tradition that helped make us what we are, liturgies that heal us and animate us to be healers of today's world.

A symbol of what is happening in our sacramental life is the butterfly emerging from the cocoon. Perhaps a better symbol is Jesus' own, the seed that produces a living plant, for this says that new life can come only by dying to what is inadequate in our past. These are hope-filled symbols, but we may not forget Jesus' other symbol: If new wine is placed in dried-out, old wineskins that cannot stretch, the new wine will be lost.

*Bernard Cooke teaches theology at Incarnate Word College in San Antonio, Texas. His most recent book is God's Beloved (Trinity Press).*

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