

Contemporary Society's Threat to Sacramentality

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Nature loves to hide

Herakleitos, *The Fragments*
[Diels, 123; Bywater, 10]

A significant threat to sacramentality, to the sense of the sacred [*sacrare*, “to make holy”], that contemporary society poses to both religious thought and expression is its denial or mitigation of the numinous quality of human experience. The sense that one moves in a constant encounter – a dance, really – with that which is not entirely known and which cannot fully be expressed is a sense increasingly dulled. The sense of the *numinos*, the holy, the mysterious inenarrability of the divine, has been seriously compromised by a contemporary approach to religious experience that is forensic [in that it cuts open a body to see how it works]; reductionist [in that if it cannot be easily explained in materialistic terms, then it is dismissed]; and mechanistic [in that actions are understood in a manner divorced from their meaning].

The sacramental experience of the human person is forever between two relationships: the relation of the human person to God [religion] and the relation of God to the human person [revelation].¹ Religion means to connect [*religo*, “to tie,” “to fasten”] but revelation means to reveal [in the Greek, *apokalypsis*, “to uncover,” “to unveil”]; which is of interest because it is a definition which suggests its antithesis. To reveal a truth presupposes that such a truth is concealed: to speak of a revelation is to indicate that something once unknown is now made known.

1. After Jean Cardinal Daniélou, “Christianity and non-Christian Religions” in T. Patrick Burke (ed.), *The Word in History*, Sheed and Ward; New York 1966, 91. As Lactantius, for example, noted in this context, “we are created on this condition, that we pay just and due obedience to God who created us, that we should know and follow Him alone. We are bound and tied to God by this chain of piety; from which religion itself received its name” [*Divine institutions*, IV.28; in the translation of William Fletcher in the *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, Volume 7 (reprinted, Hendrickson; Peabody 1994), 131].

The very word *sacrament* carries in our understanding both of these meanings. It is *mysterion*: the visible revelation, the physical sign [*sacramentum*], of an invisible grace, a hidden reality [*mysterium*].² The complementary tension, the synergy, between these two meanings is well articulated in the words of the Apostle:

For what can be known about God is perfectly plain to them, since God has made it plain to them: ever since the creation of the world, the invisible existence of God and His everlasting power have been clearly seen by the mind's understanding of created things.³

The hiddenness of God ["Truly, You are a God Who conceals Himself," Isaiah 45, 15] is the hiddenness of mystery. It is the unknowability ["Since the light had been so dazzling that I was blind," Acts 22,11] of the divine, whose fullness forever exceeds the capacity of our sight. Yet, God reveals Himself to us, He "has made it plain" to us, He makes Himself known to us through creation; itself both mystery and revelation. The bread and wine both are, and are not, because as *mysteria* they are truths both concealed and revealed.

Sacramentality is such a connectedness. It is the sight and smell, taste and feel, of human experience which seems always to suggest more than what is materially apparent. It is not, perhaps, too much to say that sacramentality is touch. It is the saliva and earth mixed together that restores to us our vision.⁴

Connectedness is touch and touch is what makes community. To the question, "Who is my neighbour?", the answer is always "Whom do you touch?". The impetus, however, for that touch, that source of community, is not religion; it is revelation:

That is the revelation of God's love for us, that God sent His only Son into the world that we might have life through Him. Love consists in this: it is not we who loved God, but God Who loved us and sent His Son to expiate our sins. My dear friends, if God loved

2. Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church* United States Catholic Conference, Washington,² 1997, 204, No. 774.

3. Romans 1,20. One is reminded of the observation of Anaxagoras, that "Appearances are a glimpse of the unseen" [Quoted in Philip Wheelwright (ed.), *The Presocratics*, Macmillan, New York 1996, 160].

4. Cf. John 9,6.

us so much, we too should love each other. No one has seen God, but as long as we love each other God remains in us and His love comes to perfection in us.⁵

That love, that mystery which is God's revelation – that mystery which is Trinity, which is community, which is love – is precisely what enables community and makes manifest connectedness. Contemporary ideas about human relations insist on what is seen, and easily demonstrable, and superficially comprehensible, but in this vain insistence mystery is lost. Paradoxically,⁶ mystery makes community and in denying mystery, community becomes impossible.

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5. John 4,9–12. In his *Joannis evangelium tractatus*, Augustine considers this very point: “Love brings about the keeping of His commandments; but does the keeping of His commandments bring about love? Who can doubt that it is love which precedes? For he has no true ground for keeping the commandments who is destitute of love.... It is not, then, for the purpose of awakening His love to us that we first keep His commandments; but this, that unless He loves us, we cannot keep His commandments” [*On the Gospel of John*, LXXXII.3; in the translation of John Gibb and James Innes in the *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, First Series, Volume 7 (reprinted, Hendrickson; Peabody 1994), 3411. See here also Titus 3,4–6.
6. As Lao Tzu remarked in the *Tao Te Ching*, “The truth often sounds paradoxical” [Chapter 78; in the translation of Gia-fu Feng and Jane English, Vintage; New York 1989, 80]. Paradox, Maisie Ward suggests in her biography of G.K. Chesterton, “must be of the nature of things because of God's infinity and the limitations of the world and of man's mind” [*Gilbert Keith Chesterton*, Sheed and Ward; New York: 1943, 155]. The juxtaposition of apparent contradictions, Ward continues, often indicates a greater truth which would otherwise be neglected or go unnoticed. One is naturally reminded on this point of the often startling images used by Jesus to describe, for example, the kingdom of heaven: that it is like a mustard seed (Matthew 13,31); that prostitutes and tax collectors shall enter into it before the priests and elders (Matthew 21,31); or, even, that it “suffereth violence, and the violent bear it away” (Matthew 11,12; cf. *The Gospel of Thomas*, logion 98). The teaching of Jesus is replete with paradox (e.g. that the first shall be last; that the least shall be greatest; that to lose is to find).

