



INSTITUTO NACIONAL HISPANO de LITURGIA

SACRED SIGNS

One of the typical experiences of the Catholic faith is the use of sacramentals. The abundance of visible signs is undoubtedly a large part of the identity of the Catholic faithful.

It is because of this use of sacramentals in the devotional life of the church that a profound reflection on its meaning and use becomes necessary.

In other words, we have to answer, “What is a sacramental?” Where do they come from and what is their relationship with Christ? As well as “What is its proper use in the church?” These are the issues we will be addressing in this section of our website.

What is a sacramental?

The simplest definition of a sacramental is offered by the Catechism of the Catholic Church in number 1667.

“Holy Mother Church has, moreover, instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men are disposed to receive the chief effect of the sacraments, and various occasions in life are rendered holy.”^[1] CCEO, can. 867.)

This definition from the Catechism of the Catholic Church, despite being concise, does

not make any doubt disappear. For to understand what a sacramental is, we must first understand what a sign is.

According to the liturgical theologian A.G. Martimor, a sign is that “natural evocative power of significant reality.” With this the theologian wants us to say that in the reality we experience that there are elements associated in our mind in a way that points us to other realities. For example, the color red reminds us, and is associated in our mind, of the idea of something dangerous or important.

The popular language captures this significant capacity of nature and uses it through colloquial phrases such as: He won it with the sweat of his brow, sweat being the sign of a physical effort and therefore work. Other phrases refer to the personality: that person is cold as an iceberg.

This type of sign we call direct type or metonymy. Well, the connection is very obvious and collective and easily understandable. As are a white coat, a green uniform, or a red rose.

But not every sign is so obvious, since some are created in the historical framework of a relationship and an experience. We call these signs indirect or relational.

We can understand them better if we go back to some moment when the loved one

gives us something, ornaments, a ring etc. Then from that moment on that reality, that gift, will be associated with that person and therefore will become a sign of that relationship. And so every time we see it, it will remind us of that relationship and experience that that person's brand has.

That is why it is convenient to understand the sign as that which bears a mark. In fact, the meaning of the Greek word *σημα* which is the root of our word sign, "is generally understood as" the mark by which something or someone is recognized. "

Thus, the liturgical signs come to be those realities that, because they have been used by God, remind us of our relationship with Him. And for that reason they are not arbitrary elements, but they submit to the use that they have had in the historical dialogue between God and humanity.

Because of this, the magisterium of the church emphasizes the exclusive use, of the species of bread and wine, historical signs of the relationship of Christ with his Church, even in the most difficult circumstances.

This dialogue between God and humanity through signs can be clearly seen in many passages of the Old Testament. In fact, the old testament uses 79 times the word sign (hebr. *אֵימָנָה*). The most exemplary use we see in the book of Genesis where God uses the rainbow as a sign, or remembrance of the covenant between God and the offspring of Noah.

"And this', God said, is the sign of the covenant which I now make between myself and you and every living creature with you for all ages to come: I now set my bow in the

clouds and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth. When I gather the clouds over the earth and the bow appears in the clouds, I shall recall the covenant between myself and you and every living creature, in a word all living things, and never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all living things. When the bow is in the clouds I shall see it and call to mind the eternal covenant between God and every living creature on earth, that is, all living things.' (Genesis 9: 12-16)

As we see in this example, the rainbow becomes a sign that God will not destroy the earth not by itself but because of the relationship, the covenant, established between God and humanity.

Sometimes the existence of signs is given as proof of the relationship between God and the person. As we see in the psalm.

Give me a sign of your kindness: my enemies will see to their shame that you, Yahweh, help and console me. (psalm 86:17)

In this psalm the psalmist does not ask for a sign to realize that he is in relationship with God, but to show his relationship with God to others. It is this use of the sign as a way of validating God's relationship with a person that will be emphasized in the time of Jesus as we will see later.

But before moving on to the use of signs in the New Testament we must examine a curiosity of the signs. And is that although the signs are "the brand by which something or someone is recognized," not for that reason that brand is universally accessible. On the contrary, the indirect signs are given within the confines of the relationship

because they have a personal character according to our experience. What for a person outside of a relationship may seem banal, for those who are in the relationship a sign may have an exceptional character.

Example: Certain smells, a perfume can make us remember the beloved person, also a film, is able to transport us to a time or an experience with a friend. In other words, these are signs that are not universal but rather personal and relational.

So that outside of the experience and the relationship with God it can be difficult to see the signs of his love towards us. This ambiguity of the sign can be seen in the battle of signs that God waged against Pharaoh.

Yahweh said to Moses in Midian, 'Go, return to Egypt, for all those who wanted to kill you are dead. So Moses took his wife and his son and, putting them on a donkey, started back for Egypt; and Moses took the staff of God in his hand. Exodus 4: 19-20)

In this battle, God tries to show Pharaoh by means of signs that He is the one who reigns over the earth and that for this reason Pharaoh will submit to his power by letting Israel go to the desert. However, due to the lack of relationship between Pharaoh and the God of Israel, it is difficult for him to see the presence of God in these signs.

'Who is Yahweh,' Pharaoh replied, 'for me to obey what he says and let Israel go? I know nothing of Yahweh, and I will not let Israel go.' *Exodus 5:2)*

And for that reason, the signs are intensified until the pharaoh recognizes through the death of his firstborn the act of God. This

shows us that we have to believe and be in relationship with God in order to see and interpret his signs. The most qualified to understand and interpret this language were the prophets of Israel. A classic example is found in the book of Isaiah.

The Lord will give you a sign in any case: It is this: the young woman is with child and will give birth to a son whom she will call Immanuel. (Isaiah 7:14)

This sign announced by Isaiah is found by Christians in the person of Christ. And for this reason, for the Christian sphere, God's relationship with his people no longer manifests itself only through words and signs, but the Sign has become flesh.

In Christ, God has made Himself a sign of His presence among men and in that way has become work and even feeling, impacting all reality. Because of this the New Testament uses the word sign 73 times in the Greek form σημεῖον.

One development that we see in the New Testament with respect to the signs is that they are no longer for the people only an extension of the dialogue with God, but that it becomes an essential element to motivate the faith. In other words, in New Testament times the signs become a guarantee that God is manifesting. We can see a clear example in the Gospel of Matthew.

Then some of the scribes and Pharisees spoke up. 'Master,' they said, 'we should like to see a sign from you.' (Matthew 12:38)

In this passage the Pharisees and Sadducees demand from Jesus signs as a way of

guaranteeing the presence of God. However, as we saw earlier the signs are not realities that impose themselves, thus destroying freedom, but are intimate signs among those who have entered into a relationship. Therefore, Jesus says next.

He replied, 'It is an evil and unfaithful generation that asks for a sign! The only sign it will be given is the sign of the prophet Jonah. (Matthew 12:39)

The Pharisees and Sadducees will not receive a sign because their condition of evil, their lack of relationship with God prevents them from seeing the sign, which is given by the sign of Jonah. That sign of Jonah is the death of Cruz and the Resurrection of Christ. It is the Sign that tells us that God really loves humanity to its ultimate consequences. Something that is expressed through liturgical art with crosses in the sanctuaries of the church.

The resurrection is, in reality, the historical sign that announces that God not only loves us to the extreme, but also has the power to return to life those He loves.

These two signs of the historical dialogue between God and men are found in the sacramental sign of baptism through which we experience death, but also the transformation, the resurrection that God offers to those who begin a relationship with Him as adopted children and children.

This extension of the word that constitutes the signs is not only used by God to communicate with men, but is also used by human beings to respond to divine initiative.

For example, by means of the embrace, shaking hands during the rite of peace in

Holy Mass we express our love for our neighbor and desire to fulfill this commandment.

From these signs the church calls sacramentals to those who in their discernment understand as intrinsically associated with the Christian experience and therefore valid for all of us. An example is the striking of the chest, during the confiteor (Jer 31,19).

Striking the chest is a visible sign of our contrition for sins and intensifies our experience to participate through the body in a reality that in principle is spiritual.

The common use of the signs of God and of human beings is that for both the Church uses these signs as "language that prolongs or intensifies the Word. Its evocative power facilitates the intelligence of the message and on the other hand it expresses the strength of the feelings. "For this reason, its use becomes widespread and common in the Christian event. It is precisely these signs used in the historical dialogue between God and men that the Catechism of the Catholic Church calls sacred signs.

Conclusion.

In short, we could say that sacramentals are sacred signs because they are born of the "natural evocative power of significant reality" which are used in the dialogue between God and his Church to "prolong and intensify the word and, thus, make it more intelligible and add the strength of feelings. "

It is because of this ability of the signs to extend and emphasize the different aspects of our dialogue and relationship with God, for the benefit of the faith, that the church

elevates them to the dignity of sacramentals and makes them accessible to the people of God.

Now, what relationship do sacramentals and sacraments have? What are your

differences? These are the questions that we will be exploring in the next pages.

¹ Aimé Georges Martimort, *Biblioteca Herder. Sección de Liturgia, nueva (4a.) ed.*, vol. 58, *La Iglesia En Oración: Introducción a La Liturgia* (Barcelona: Herder, 1992), 196.

¹ Karl Heinrich Rengstorf, "[Σημεῖον, Σημαίνω, Σημειόω, Ἄσημος, Ἐπίσημος, Εὔσημος, Σύστημαον.](#)" ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey W. Bromiley, and Gerhard Friedrich, *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1964—), 203.

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