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Signs of Christ for Modern Man

H. PAUL LE MAIRE, S.J.

Introduction

One of the marks distinctive of modern man is his drive for unity and harmony in his life, especially for unity and harmony between his secular and religious experience.¹ If, however, as Paul Tillich somewhere remarks, this lack of harmony between the secular and the religious is the result of sin, then unity will always remain an ideal that man will have to strive for, but never quite succeed in attaining. In his drive for harmony in his life style, modern man sometimes looks with suspicion on the seven sacraments as being overly religious.² They seem to belong to a realm of life utterly divorced from his secular experience. He is implicitly aware of Pascal's scathing criticism of the sacramental system and Christianity when he wrote that Christianity is composed of a group of men who by means of seven sacraments dispense themselves from the obligation of loving God. To that we might add also his neighbor. Thus, looking for Christ in others and working for the poor seems more "meaningful," more "relevant" than participating in the Eucharistic celebration where we have developed a set of actions and atti-

¹ See, for example, Leslie Dewart, *The Future of Belief* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1966), pp. 7 ff.

² Scores of books and articles are being written on the problem of God, faith, and the Church, but we find little being done on a topic like the sacraments.

tudes found almost nowhere in secular life. Christ should be found only in others, according to modern man. As a consequence, he solves his harmony problem by trying to eliminate the explicitly religious from his experience or by allowing it to slide into the shadowy realm of his life.

In the thesis that we should seek Christ only in others lurk one difficulty and one danger. The difficulty is of course the problem of faith. Christian faith is not precisely the same as humanistic faith. The former demands a commitment to the person of Christ *and* the person of others. If we step around or suppress either one, we step around or suppress Christianity. Humanistic faith, while in many ways no less easy than Christian faith, demands only a single commitment to my brother in the human family. Christianity thus finds itself from the modern point of view in the somewhat paradoxical position of demanding commitment to the immediate reality of this world and the other person and to the transcendent reality of Christ living partially in another order of reality. The history of Christianity shows that it is not an easy task to maintain harmony between these two orders of reality.

Many of us — priests, nuns, parents, religion teachers— are still living under the illusion that everyone born a Christian should and will, in the normal circumstances of life, continue to profess Christianity until death. While we acknowledge pluralism in theory, we forget that part of living in a pluralistic society is living with pluralistic values. We forget that once we present man with a choice—and the modern world presents him with many—it is a foregone conclusion that not everyone will choose the way we think he should. And faith, if it is nothing else, is a *choice* either for Christ or against him.³ This we cannot escape and while we continuously try to update Christianity and streamline it to meet the needs and hopes of man, we must not forget that in the last analysis the individual must decide if he is for

³ E. Schillebeeckx, "Faith Functioning in Human Understanding," *The Word in History* (T. Patrick Burke, editor; New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), p. 49 and *passim*.

or against Christianity. In a certain but very true sense, moreover, he must continue to decide for the rest of his life.

At the same time, our concept of the "anonymous" Christian is sometimes too narrow. Its applicability is too often limited only to those who have never heard the message of Christ, but who live their lives according to Christian principles and the inspirations of their grace-filled consciences. The reality of the "anonymous" Christian must be so extended as to include those who, while born Christians or even having once been Christian, have later on in life for one reason or another rejected explicit Christianity, but who incarnate in their lives the basic Christian moral principle: love your neighbor as yourself. This is perhaps what Bonhoeffer meant when he said he felt more at home in talking of God with the "irreligious" than with the "religious."⁴

Furthermore, the Catholic Christian seems to be constantly faced with the challenge of avoiding narrow-mindedness. From his youth the Church precept of hearing Mass every Sunday has been hammered—sometimes gently, sometimes not so gently—into his malleable conscience. As a result he is inclined perfectly to equate commitment to Christ with weekly appearance at Mass. If the latter goes, so does the former. This seems to be a gratuitous assumption. Moreover, if the mark of commitment, either explicit or implicit, to Christ is love of God and neighbor, then it is even questionable how much the average Sunday Mass crowd is committed.

The danger facing the Christian when he looks for Christ only in the faces of others is that he may forget what he is looking for. Service of others is certainly a religious act, since it is the foundation of Christian morality. Yet it is not as explicitly religious as participating in Christian worship. Man needs the explicit to keep alive the implicit. A husband who has scanty contact with his wife, but who supports her financially, will soon come to forget her. He needs the explicit sight of her to remember that she is to be found implicitly in the work he is doing. It seems, therefore, that

⁴ Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Letters and Papers from Prison* (London: Fontana Books, 1953), pp. 92-93.

Christian man needs the explicitly religious to keep alive his motivation, namely, that he serves others for their own sake *and* for the sake of Christ.

Thesis

This brings us to what may be called the central thesis of this article: the Catholic is tempted either to put too much emphasis on the seven sacraments or too little. Harmony in this regard is hard to come by. We have just lived through a period in the history of the Church when we have attributed too much importance to the seven sacraments. We forgot that Christ is first of all someone who is present to us in the Church, in the community of God's people and, thus, he is present to us in the stream of daily experience. Now we run the risk of forgetting that besides being present in the daily experiences of our lives, he is present in a singular, more intensive way in the seven sacraments.

The significance of the Incarnation is not exhausted when we say that Christ appears to us in human form. It also means that Christ deals with us in a human way, i.e. he deals with us in such a way as to show respect for what it means to be a man. For man is a reality with a two-fold aspect: he is both bodily and spiritual. When we ask, "Why can't I communicate with God in the interior of my heart, loving Him and asking for forgiveness?" we risk forgetting our own human identity. Man is also bodily, i.e., he has a drive and a need to express what is in the interior of his heart in a bodily way, through word and action and by so doing, he perfects and develops what is interior. A mother may, in a limited sense, truly love her child, but if she does not express that love in word and action, her love will not help her child to grow and develop. Moreover, if she fails to express this love, her own love for her child will not mature, but will languish and die.

The Incarnation is Sacramental

The Incarnation, it may be said, is God's realization that He must express His love for man, not in His way (a purely

spiritual one), but in man's way (bodily *and* spiritual). And so He sent His son to join our human family as an expression of His love for us in word and action. As a result of this insight E. Schillebeeckx, O.P., calls Christ the sacrament of encounter with God.⁵ Christ is a sacrament because He is a bodily, visible, historical sign of what is in the interior of God's heart: love for mankind and a desire to communicate with him. Christ expressed by word and action in his life this love of the Father for us and the love of man for the Father and by so doing he made his own love for man and the Father grow and mature.⁶

Church is Sacramental

But Christ, besides being God's son, was also a man and by becoming a man he had to become by human necessity a particular man. He was Jewish, born at a particular moment in history, in a particular country with its own culture and language. At the same time an integral part of his message is to be found in his claim that he came not merely for the Jews, but for all men of all cultures and climes and all periods of history. Here we discover the significance of the Church. The Church must never be totally identified with Christ, since Christ is Christ and we are the Church and we are certainly not Christ. Yet our purpose, the Church's purpose, is to express that presence of Christ in each culture, in each era of the world's history. Thus, while we are not Christ, we are supposed to be the *sacrament* of Christ, i.e., we are to show him and his love for man to the world.

As a result of this understanding of the Church, we see a further extension of the word sacrament: we are, the Church is, sacramental.⁷ We keep alive, we mirror forth, the presence of Christ not in a universal, but in a particular way—in this particular culture, in this particular place at this particular

⁵ E. Schillebeeckx, O. P., *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1953), pp. 7-45.

⁶ *Ibid.* pp. 25 ff.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 47 ff. See also Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (London: Herder, 1963), pp. 11 ff.

moment in mankind's history. Consequently, in order for the Church, as the sacrament of Christ's presence, to be truly universal, for all men, it must become particular, i.e., for these particular men. It must become a local Church thoroughly embedded in the lives of particular men and women helping to meet their needs and hopes, before it can become a universal Church.

At the same moment, however, that we, as the Church, sacramentalize Christ's love in a particular portion of the world, it is in the same Church that we ourselves encounter him. More exactly, it is because we encounter the presence of Christ within the Christian community that we are able to sacramentalize his presence to the world. Thus, the Church is both an exterior and interior sacrament: the members sacramentalize Christ to one another and simultaneously sacramentalize him for those not in communion with the Christian community.

By calling the Church as the people of God a sacrament, we break the narrow bonds of traditional Catholicism's meaning of sacrament and extend it to all realities by which God makes His love for men visible in this world of men and things. The world we live in is sacramental inasmuch as Christ makes use of it as the means by which we encounter Him.

The World is Sacramental

For there is no sharp dividing line between the Church and the world. The same people who make up the Church also help to make up the reality we call the world with this difference: those who compose the Church have accepted the person of Christ. The members of the Church to an overwhelming extent engage in the same activities as those who are only members of the world. They eat, sleep, get married, have children, do their jobs and live their lives with more or less the same amount of success and failure, joy and sorrow as those who are not in communion with the Church. The difference lies in the fact that the people of God have accepted

the saving action of Christ. This means that what we call the daily events of their lives may also be sacramental events, i.e., a manifestation of Christ and a means of encountering him.

As Schillebeeckx shows so well, the sacramental means that Christ makes earthly realities the extension of his own glorified body in order that man may have a personal encounter with him.⁸ First of all and fundamentally, Christ takes the ordinary events of our lives—the people we meet, the experiences we undergo, the things we do—and sacramentalizes them, i.e., he makes them the means of encountering him in a relationship of love. This is especially true of the people who touch our lives either permanently or simply by moving in and out of them. The words they speak, the things they do, are all potentially sacramental for us.

Why is this so? Because of the Incarnation. Christ in the daily events and actions of his life was the sacrament of encounter with God. The sacramental action of Christ's life was not limited to the strictly religious: prayer on the mountain top, sermons before the people and the like, but extended to what for lack of a better word we call "ordinary," "every-day" actions—stopping for a glass of water by a well, having dinner with friends and acquaintances, going to a wedding reception.

The Incarnation is a permanent commitment on the part of God to act towards us in an incarnate way, i.e., in a sacramental way, a visible, tangible, historical way. If this sacramental way had ceased with the death-resurrection event in the life of Christ, this would mean that while the Incarnation was for men living in Palestine in the opening years of the Christian era, it would not have been for us.⁹ It would not have touched our lives and therefore would have been truly irrelevant.

⁸ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of Encounter with God*. p. 41.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 43.

Presence of Christ

Thus, if we limit our sacramental encounters with the risen Christ merely to the seven official signs of the Church, we forget the more fundamental presence of Christ which makes possible the seven-fold presence of Christ. This fundamental presence is the presence of Christ to his Church, to the new people of God, remaining in the world, but gathered together at the same time as a result of the Lord's resurrection. It is here within the Church made up of those who accept Christ and overlapping with the world in such a way that it is almost impossible to distinguish Church and world that we sacramentally encounter the risen Christ.

The reason that we can encounter Christ in a special way in the seven sacraments is precisely because prior to these encounters He is present to the Church. Before members of a family can encounter one another in an intensive way in the special events of their lives: the evening meal, birthday, anniversary celebrations, despedidas, etc., they must be present to one another in the home, in the daily routine of their lives. Without this latter presence, special presences of love and affection become impossible.

By forgetting the basic fundamental presence of Christ to his people, we risk putting too much stress and importance on the seven special sacraments. We risk this by not realizing that before Christ can be intensively present, he must be ordinarily present. Just as a family cannot be intensively present to one another on special occasions unless they are ordinarily present, so we cannot expect to be present to Christ in the Sunday Eucharistic celebration, unless we have made an effort to be ordinarily present to him as we meet him in his sacramental manifestations in our daily lives. The person committed to self and self interests is indeed expecting a bit of Sunday magic if he anticipates that something phenomenal is going to happen to him at the Eucharistic celebration.

Modern Man's Difficulty

Yet this is not modern man's typical difficulty with the sacraments. It lies much more in this direction: if I see Christ

in the faces of others, in the daily tasks of my everyday life, what need have I for the Sunday Eucharistic celebration? To use a well-worn cliché, but one veiling a genuine difficulty: "Mass seems irrelevant to me." To make it even more general, the explicitly religious seems irrelevant.

How much of a cliché this is may be gathered from the unreflective way in which it is mouthed by so many, especially among the younger generation. Yet it does cloak two serious difficulties: the more basic problem of faith hinted at above and the more particular problem of the place of the seven sacraments in the life of modern man. We will make only a few remarks on the topic of faith, since it is not the subject matter of this article. It must be emphatically said that the old notion of being born a Christian is no longer adequate, if it ever was. Baptism is only the first step of our Christian lives. The Christian faith no longer—if it ever did—overwhelms us as the only possible key to the mystery of life. If we choose to be Christian, we choose a risk. If we choose to be Christian, to make ourselves Christian and to remain so, we choose a task that we must continuously work at. Any other attitude against the pluralistic backdrop of modern society is unrealistic. To remain attached to the vine is no longer merely a question of not doing anything to have ourselves pruned away. It takes a positive strenuous effort to remain grafted to the vine.

Perhaps the reason it requires a continuous effort to remain attached to the Christian vine is the exaggerated optimism of modern man. He feels himself to be gaining greater and greater control over the world situation even to the point of crashing through the genetic barrier. More and more, man, impressed by his own accomplishments, seems to be convinced that the key to the mystery of life is not to be found in any transcendent being explaining man's own existence as a creature, but in the interior of his own being.

The story of man's progress in controlling and perfecting nature, especially in this century, indeed makes impressive

reading. But so does the record of man's failures: war, poverty, famine, the expanding dimensions of the ecology problem. The latter is perhaps telling us that neither submission to nature nor control over it is the answer to the world's problems, but rather an effort on man's part to live in harmony with his environment. Yet, strangely enough, modern man seems unwilling to tally up his failures and weigh them against his successes so as to obtain a more realistic image of himself. He seems unwilling to admit that perhaps the more he controls nature, the more problems he creates for himself because he is unable to grasp simultaneously all of reality. Hidden facts always escape him and reappear later to plague his existence.

As far as faith is concerned, it is obvious that as long as man persists in believing that he alone contains the key to the mystery of life, that by controlling nature he supplants God, God will remain in His tomb. For attitudes in this direction render impossible any kind of belief in a transcendent being who, precisely because He is transcendent, explains the existence of the immediate objects of our human experience. Modern man is a man of faith—that is not quite his problem. But his faith is in himself and not in someone transcending him. On the other hand, he does not see that even to have faith in himself requires some sort of transcendental leap.

The Example of Christ

As I said above, we must apply ourselves to the task of faith. This implies an effort to break down the pigeonhole type of lives many of us lead where each compartment of our life, especially the religious, has its neatly labeled title. This type of living prevents the introduction of any genuine unity into our lives. Part of our problem, as far as the religious compartment is concerned, stems from our over-concentration on the death-resurrection event in Christ's life. Granted that this was the great chord sounded in Christ's life, it was not an isolated one. It fitted into the harmony of his whole life.

The softer theme, however, in his life was his radical obedience¹⁰, i.e., his constant concern at finding the dynamic manifestation of the Father in his life: in the dreariness and excitement of life at Nazareth; in his adolescent years; in the friends he made and the experiences he underwent; in a country under a foreign power; in his contacts with the twelve men whose lives were to become so intertwined with his; in his failures and successes; in his humiliations and his joys. In all of this he tried to live a life of radical obedience to the Father by trying to discern his Father's plan. In this way he prepared for the great event of his life — his death and resurrection.

By our tendency to divorce the final events of Christ's life from what went before, we pigeonhole his life and thus we pigeonhole our own lives into the religious and the secular. The whole life of Christ was religious inasmuch as it was lived in radical obedience to the Father. In exactly the same way are our lives supposed to be religious: we seek the developing plan of God through the encounters with Christ in the daily events of our lives—encounters which are sacramental because they take place in a tangible, visible, bodily, social, historical way.

A sacrament is a sign. An appreciation of the sign nature of Christ's activity in our lives requires an appreciation of the broader aspect of sign.¹¹ Signs are fundamental to our humanity. Our very bodies show forth to others what is interior to us—the words we speak, the actions we perform all reveal what is interior to us. The lover gives his beloved a ring as a sign of his love and commitment to her. What is in

¹⁰ The New Testament calls man to a life of absolute, radical obedience to God. While we have an obligation to obey human authority under normal conditions, we cannot give to it the kind of obedience reserved for God alone. The past tendency in the Catholic Church to identify God and Church authority has resulted in a misunderstanding of Christian obedience and in ecclesiastical glorification and triumphalism.

¹¹ See Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament* . . . , pp. 64-65; 76-77. See also Joseph Yperman, *Teaching the Eucharist*, pp. 5-24.

itself merely a piece of metal and a chip of stone becomes a visible symbol of what they feel invisibly in their hearts for one another. As a piece of metal, it is worth little, but by becoming a symbol it takes on an incomparable human value.

Our world is literally a world of signs and symbols. At almost every moment we give tangible, visible expression of what we feel inside of ourselves and simultaneously we receive signs of what the other feels inside of himself. This is why, as pointed out earlier, the Incarnation is God's realization that He must deal with man not in His way, but in man's way. And so by means of the outward sign of the Incarnation He gives tangible expression of His love for man. As a result, every sacramental manifestation of Christ in our lives is very simply a continuation of the Incarnation.

The Seven Sacraments

Where, however, do the seven sacraments instituted in a special way by Christ fit into the more comprehensive sacramental structure of our lives? Or to put it another way: if the whole of man's life is potentially sacramental and thus implicitly religious, does he have need of the explicitly religious?

A Metaphor

The most powerful and at the same time the most touching metaphor woven into the fabric of the Old Testament used to describe the relationship between God and man is that of marriage. God is the bridegroom, the husband; Israel, the bride, the wife. In looking for a metaphor to describe the multiple sacramental manifestation of Christ and the seven special sacraments, the most appropriate direction we can take, it seems, is to extend that biblical metaphor with the help of modern Christian man's reflection on marriage and the place of marital relations within the total context of marriage.

Modern man's reflection on marriage has shown him that the purpose of the sexual act is both to express love and to deepen it. As an expression of love, it is prepared for, led up to, by the "routine of love" developed in the multiple ex-

perience of two people sharing their lives with one another. This "routine of love", inadequately expressed in the ordinary events of life, strives to find adequate expression in the sexual act. As a consequence, the sexual act is a sacrament, a sign of two people's love for one another. Love is summed up and finds dramatic expression in the marital act.

At the same time, the marital act is a sacramental deepening of that love. A true sign not only says something, but it perfects and develops what it says. The child who gives his mother a flower at one and the same time says that he loves his mother and causes that love to grow. So the sexual act between husband and wife not only expresses love, but causes that love to flower in ever greater luxuriance. To mix the metaphor a bit, this is comparable to the experience of every teacher. As he tries to express his thoughts to his students, he clarifies and deepens them for himself.

What significance does this have for our consideration of the sacramental in the life of the Christian? The seven sacraments, especially those of the Eucharist and Penance, have as their purpose both to express and deepen the mutual commitment between the risen Christ and ourselves. Insofar as expression is concerned, the Eucharist should sum up and express our love for Christ and his for us, as this love is lived in the daily routine of our lives. It gathers together and clarifies this love and expresses it in a peculiarly intense way through our sharing in the Eucharist celebrations. Just as the marital act between husband and wife is a false sign if it is not prepared for by a "routine of love", so too is the Eucharist a false sign if it is not prepared for by a "routine of love." A sacrament is not a bit of magic; it does not turn our lives upside down; it simply expresses in a more intense way what Christ and ourselves have been trying to say all along.

Not only do the seven sacraments and especially the Eucharist express our love for Christ and his for us, but like the marital act, they serve to deepen that love because of the intensity that accompanies any true sign. A mother sometimes cries when her son gives her a present because her emo-

tions are gathered together and concentrated in the gift. So for us Christians, the mutual love between Christ and ourselves is gathered together and concentrated in the Eucharist and as a result, it deepens this love and makes us more appreciative of its meaning in our lives.

The sexual act by its physical intimacy and emotional intensity brings two people closer together. This is the purpose of the seven sacraments: by their religious intensity and the more intimate presence of Christ to us, we draw closer to him and he to us.

Needless to say, when we speak of love for the risen Christ, we are speaking of the Christ who exists in, and is present to, his people, as the head of the body. Any attempt to isolate the risen Christ from his brothers makes of the seven sacraments, especially the Eucharist, a false sign.

Humanae Vitae touches upon the particular character of marital love when it says that it is total and human.¹² It is not, as we often remark, merely spiritual since this would detract from its totality and humanity. Sexual relations then become not a *remedium concupiscentiae*, but a necessary means of expressing and deepening marital love. This is not to say that married people can never survive without marital relations; they sometimes must and do for rather long periods of time, but this is not the ordinary nor fully human way of living marriage. It is rather the extraordinary and not-so-satisfactory way and must be made up for by greater intensity in the daily "routine of love."

In the same way, the Christian who says he can live his life of love for Christ merely by his devotion to Christ in others is in effect saying that his way is the extraordinary way. Perhaps he is right, but is he not denying the need we all have for high points, moments of intensity, special events in our lives, moments when our thoughts, desires and emotions are gathered together to focus on one sign? Christ could have saved us merely by his daily "routine of love," but he gathered

¹² *Humanae Vitae*, no. 9.

up that routine and expressed it in one symbol—his death-resurrection—perhaps out of fear that we would someday forget what his life was all about.

The Christian, especially as he is confronted by the plurality of gods and values in the modern world, always runs the risk of forgetting what his life is all about. The Eucharist especially by its commemorative aspect (Do this in memory of me) serves to remind the Christian what he is doing when he serves Christ's brothers. He is not serving himself nor merely his neighbor, but he is serving the transcendent reality of Christ who integrates and holds his life together and prevents him from worshipping false gods. Lack of integrity, of wholeness in our lives is a constant danger facing us today. Just as the symbol of the library is particularly appropriate to remind student and teacher, during a time when the political has set a firm foot on the campus, of the ultimate purpose of the university, so too the Eucharist should remind the Christian, in an era of pluralism, of the ultimate purpose of his life.

Boredom

One of the great enemies of modern man is boredom. Because he is afraid of being bored, he flits like a butterfly from one flower to the other always in search, he says, of meaning and relevance. He risks never settling down to make a quiet, sustained contribution to society because he quickly tires of what he is doing and never realizes that the total elimination of boredom is impossible. Boredom touches also upon the routine of the explicitly religious and makes it appear at times to be meaningless. The mobs at Sunday Mass, the same old songs, the ill-prepared priestly words, the poorly read Scripture readings, the religious clichés, all make their own contribution to the human experience of being bored.¹³

We cannot expect that every participation in the Eucharistic celebration will be crammed full of meaning and experience. If we wish God to deal with us in our way, we cannot but expect that at times this will be a boring way. Just as every

human being no matter how interesting and fascinating bores us at times (we even bore ourselves), so too God will bore us at times. The meaning will slip out of the sign and we will be forced to shake ourselves from our lethargy to go off in search of it. Peter, James, and John fell asleep in the presence of the agonizing Christ. We will fall asleep in the presence of the religious, but this does not *ipso facto* make the religious an event of no consequence. Sometimes we demand from the Liturgy what we demand from no other experience in our lives, namely that it always be a resounding success.

Conclusion

We said earlier in this article—and this has been the linchpin upon which everything has been hung—that the Christian risks either putting too much importance on the seven sacraments or too little. In the former case, he risks expecting the sacraments to do for his life either what he refuses to do for himself or is too lethargic to do—namely to change his life, to be “converted.” In the latter, he risks not seeing the purpose of these seven special signs instituted by Christ, namely that their role is to sum up what Christ has been trying to say to him and he to Christ in the routine of daily living. At the same time, these seven special signs serve to deepen by their intensive religious character what Christ has been trying to bring him to—namely commitment to himself.

Somewhere on the high middle road between these two extremes lies the truth. To use the sacraments as an implicit excuse not to love one’s neighbor is unchristian. To use one’s neighbor as an excuse not to be religious is to risk losing one’s direction and thus the ultimate meaning of one’s Christian life. There must be a religious cycle to everyone’s life—a cycle which will have a different movement for different men. It is our task to discover our own religious rhythm that fluctuates between the sacraments of our daily lives and the seven special sacraments instituted by Christ.