



Episode 6: Signs and Symbols

SUMMARY

The Catholic Mass is full of signs and symbols. Where do these signs come from? Where do they get their meaning? The Church teaches that the meaning comes from four categories: creation, human culture, the Old Testament and they are fully revealed in the mission of Christ narrated for us in the New Testament. The sacramental system depends on signs that are perceptible. Every created thing has the impression of God, the Divine Artisan.

In the first category, creation itself, we can see what the sacramental signs mean. Water means cleansing; oil means healing, protection. The second category is human culture: what are the naturally human things we do? Language, too, falls into this category. We speak in different ways depending on the social context. The third category includes the events of the Old Testament which provide models for meaning: crossing the Red Sea symbolizes freedom from slavery; the great flood symbolizes the destruction of evil; the preaching of the prophets represents the voice of God, his desire to restore us to life.

The mystery of creation, culture and the old covenant are brought together in the fourth category, in Christ, who is the fullest revelation of God—he *is* God!

Nothing in the Mass is there by chance; everything in the liturgy has meaning.

Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy

... it is from scripture that lessons are read and explained in the homily, and psalms are sung; the prayers, collects, and liturgical songs are scriptural in their inspiration and their force, and it is from the scriptures that actions and signs derive their meaning. (n°. 24)

... the visible signs used by the liturgy to signify invisible divine things have been chosen by Christ or the Church. Thus not only when things are read “which were written for our instruction” (Rom. 15:4), but also when the Church prays or sings or acts, the faith of those taking part is nourished and their minds are raised to God, so that they may offer Him their rational service and more abundantly receive His grace. (n°. 33)

Saint John Paul II

The best way to enter into the mystery of salvation made present in the sacred ‘signs’ remains that of following faithfully the unfolding of the liturgical year.

Pastors should be committed to that ‘mystagogical’ catechesis so dear to the Fathers of the Church, by which the faithful are helped to understand the meaning of the liturgy’s words and actions, to pass from its signs to the mystery which they contain, and to enter into that mystery in every aspect of their lives.

Mane Nobiscum Domine, n°. 17

THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH

✠ A sacramental celebration is woven from signs and symbols. In keeping with the divine pedagogy of salvation, their meaning is rooted in the work of creation and in human culture, specified by the events of the Old Covenant and fully revealed in the person and work of Christ.”

Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC), n°. 1145

✠ “In his preaching the Lord Jesus often makes use of the signs of creation to make known the mysteries of the Kingdom of God. He performs healings and illustrates his preaching with physical signs or symbolic gestures. He gives new meaning to the deeds and signs of the Old Covenant, above all to the Exodus and the Passover, for he himself is the meaning of all these signs.”

CCC, n°. 1151

IN THE TRADITION

Consider, beloved, how the Lord keeps reminding us of the resurrection that is to come, of which he has made the Lord Jesus Christ the first fruits by raising him from the

dead. Let us look, beloved, at the resurrection that occurs at its appointed time. Day and night show us a resurrection; the night lies in sleep, day rises again; the day departs, night takes its place. Let us think about the harvest; how does the sowing take place, and in what manner? The sower goes out and casts each seed onto the ground. Dry and bare, they fall into the earth and decay. Then the greatness of the Lord’s providence raises them up again from decay, and out of one many are produced and yield fruit.

Letter to the Corinthians, Pope Clement I

It is not at the clothing of the words that one should gaze but at the power hidden in the words.

St. Ephrem

IN THE PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

May your Sacraments, O Lord, we pray, perfect in us what lies within them, that what we now celebrate in signs we may one day possess in truth. Through Christ our Lord.

Prayer after Communion, Thirtieth Sunday in Ordinary Time

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. In what ways are created things used in the Mass?
2. What events or images from the Sacred Scriptures can you recognize in the celebration of the Mass?
3. What are some of the signs in the liturgy that you would like to better understand? How do the words the Church uses manifest the meaning of these signs?