

# TODAY'S LITURGY

A quarterly publication for liturgy preparation

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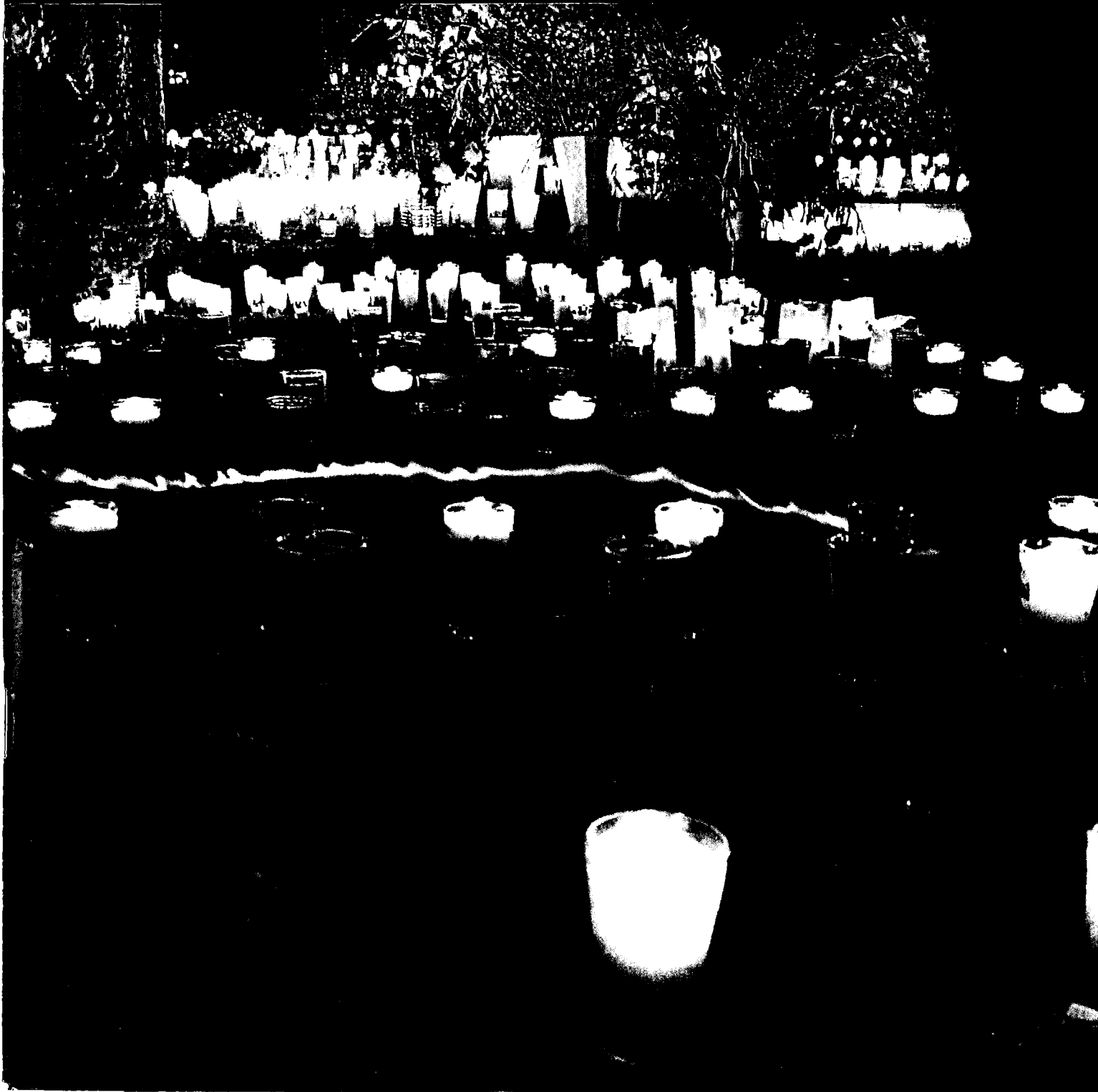
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# Through Symbolic Communication

Part 4 of 4: A Series on Eucharist

Parts 1, 2, and 3 appeared in the Advent-Christmas-Epiphany, Lent-Easter Triduum-Easter, and Ordinary Time 1 issues.



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Symbols operate on all levels of our life experiences, shaping our reality, helping us communicate our identity. Whether on the social/political level (think flags, monuments, and patriotic songs) or on the personal/relational level (think wedding rings, handshakes, and roses), symbols are means of communicating reality. For believers in the Triune God, the fullest expression of our identity is communicated through a rich use of symbols, in our celebration of the Eucharist and indeed in all our liturgical celebrations (think baptismal water, funeral palls, anointing with oil, laying on of hands, bread and wine). The more we understand the symbols of our celebration the deeper will be our understanding of our worship.

*Into Great Silence* is a recent film that immerses the viewer in the daily life of the Carthusian abbey of the Grande Chartreuse. Nestled in the French Alps, these monks live a life of silence, sung prayer, and occasional conversation. They live and breathe the symbolic life of the Church. Their use of time, of space, what they wear and how they move, their use of light and dark, bread and wine—all communicates their life in Christ. We encounter these same symbols in our worship. “Our entire life, the whole liturgy, and all things ceremonial are symbols,” one of the monks explains. “If you abolish the symbols, you tear down the walls of your own house” (DVD. Directed by Philip Gröning. New York: Zeitgeist Films, 2007). The monastic experience confirms, then, this great truth: we do not bend the symbol, the symbol bends us. They form us even when we think we have control of them.

## MULTIPLE EXPRESSIONS, MULTIPLE MEANINGS

What is a symbol? It can be visual or aural; it can be a gesture, a sound, a word, or an object. But no matter what it *is*, what it *does* is communicate meaning by way of evocation, invitation, and participation in the reality it confers (Happel 1238). Symbols are marked by their ability to communicate on many levels at the same time. They contain many meanings and communicate these meanings through interaction with human beings. Think about an American flag. We experience it in multiple ways: flown over buildings and on flag poles; laid on coffins; carried into battle; worn on clothing; burned in protest; carried in demonstration. The meanings it conveys are as varied as the ways it is encountered. It communicates loyalty, pride, shared history, and common values, sacrifice, goals, and desires. But it can also be used to communicate disaffection, protest, and anger. It is a symbol. Its meanings cannot be exhausted. So it is with any true symbol. In the

act of experiencing the symbol, human beings are drawn into levels of meaning that affect them intellectually, emotionally, spiritually, physically, and morally. Rather than define, they disclose. Rather than clarify, their meaning is ambiguous. Through symbol we are able to enter into mystery.

## SYMBOLS IN THE LITURGY

Symbols are the language of sacramental encounter. They communicate the meanings presented to us as we celebrate our relationship with God and one another. If we wish to understand the eucharistic liturgy, one way of doing so is to trace the symbols we meet along the way. From the moment we leave the doors of our homes on a Sunday morning to the steps we take as we leave the church at the end of the liturgy, we are engaged in symbolic communication. We are shaped by these events even as we participate in shaping the celebration. As I mentioned in the last article (*Today's Liturgy* Ordinary Time 1 2010), there is no such thing as a *mere* symbol. Symbols

*“If you abolish the symbols, you tear down the walls of your own house.”*

are not the opposite of reality (the old saw: it's not real, it's just a symbol), but rather are invitations into the depths of God.

### **ARCHITECTURE AND ENVIRONMENT**

All that we are speaking of communicates the reality of the divine. Hence it matters that we pay attention to both verbal and nonverbal realities. One of the first symbolic things we encounter in our eucharistic experience is the environment in which we celebrate. How is the building shaped? Does it reflect the ordering of the Church today or of a bygone era? Consider the light in the worship space. Is the space light or dark? What do we see and where are our eyes drawn, “up front” or to one another? The building encloses the Church, the body of Christ, the baptized. We are the living symbol of the sacrament of Christ. In our choice of decoration and its placement—how we organize ourselves, how we arrange our spaces and furnish them—we communicate who we understand ourselves to be and what is important to us. We disclose meaning and invite (or perhaps dissuade) participation. This is all accomplished through symbol.

### **MUSIC**

We begin the liturgy in song, drawing the varied members of the community together in one vocal expression. Out of hundreds of individuals, music forms all into a single voice, lifted in praise toward our God. Through what we hear and what we sing, we both communicate the reality of a community in relationship and form that community into an encounter with the divine. Symbols are means of both formation and transformation.

### **PROCESSIONS**

At the beginning of the liturgy there is usually an entrance procession of ministers, book, cross, and candles. This is ritualized journey, our journey following the cross of Christ through our lives, embodied in the movement of the ministers who serve the community. Our processions communicate our movement in Christ. Think of the funeral procession, a procession of the body into the church, and the placing of the pall, symbolic of the baptismal garment. In this way, the baptized now makes this final transition with the community. We have our procession at the end of the Holy Thursday liturgy (transfer of the Holy Eucharist), a journey of the baptized body with the eucharistic body, human heart with Bread of Life. Having washed the feet of others, we bear witness to our life in Christ. We remind ourselves of our identity to serve others; we follow the symbol of our relationship with God. We are a processing Church. We process the Gospel book, the catechumens, the gifts; we process in and out of liturgy. We are a people on a journey and we express this journey symbolically.

### **LITURGY OF THE WORD**

Words are symbols, too. A word is not the object; a word is a symbol pointing to the reality. For example, the word “bread” is not a loaf of bread, but as soon as we see the word we think of what it means. Words are symbolic not just because they point to that which they represent but because they disclose other realities at the same time. When we speak, we reveal something of our very selves. We cannot help but disclose who we are when we use words. There is a reason why we

don't just pull out our Bibles and all read silently during the Liturgy of the Word. God's word is most fully proclaimed when it is given human voice, embodied in space and time by a human person. It is the word for all time and for all people while simultaneously in its proclamation it is a word for this moment, for this community, for these people.

Liturgical language is fraught with ambiguity. We do not say, “this is the word of the Lord,” but “the word of the Lord”; not “this is the body of Christ,” but “the body of Christ.” Such language is open-ended, ambiguous, symbolic. The word of the Lord is the word just proclaimed, but it is more as well. It is the word embodied in the minister and the community. It is the word shared, the relationships formed. It is the living word enfleshed in the voice of the proclaimer. The body of Christ is the bread shared, and also the bodies who communicate. When we communicate, the minister says, “The body of Christ” or “the blood of Christ,” not “This is....” This is an open statement that encompasses not just the bread and the wine as the body and blood of Christ, but the person who gives and the person who receives, indeed the entire congregation. It is the body of the baptized, even as it is the body present in mystery as gift. “The Lord *be* with you” is not a declaration that Christ *is* present. It is not “the Lord *is* with you.” Rather it is an assertion, a hope, a promise that Christ has given to be in our midst. The words of our prayers, the words of our liturgies leave room for the presence of God. They do not demand or declare, they disclose, hinting at the mystery in our midst.

### **COMMUNION**

This mystery is made manifest around the table, itself a symbol of our

Through symbol we are able to enter into mystery.

communal action. As one community of the baptized, through the symbols of word and sacrament, we celebrate the gift of our salvation. All that has come before in the liturgy is preparation for these actions. Gathering together, proclaiming the word, and actively listening to that proclamation form us into one body ready to remember. Having fed at the table of the word we now gather at the table of the Eucharist. We make *anamnesis*. This ancient Greek word means to actively remember and in so doing to make that memory present among us now. As we pray the eucharistic prayer, we look back at the saving action of Christ and in so doing that reality is present among us. We do not focus on the Eucharist as object alone. Rather, we understand that the Eucharist is an action, an event that is celebrated by the entire community—presbyter and assembly together. Although there was a period in our history when our focus tended to be on the objects of bread and wine to the exclusion of the action (this was covered in my previous article), Vatican II clearly returned us to an understanding of the Eucharist encompassing the symbols of community gathered, praying, singing, eating, and drinking. Indeed the high point of the eucharistic celebration is understood to be Communion, the time when these symbolic actions most fully express the reality signified. It is in eating and drinking as one community that we most completely convey what it means to be the body and blood of Christ, in relationship with God and one another.

#### DISMISSAL

Throughout the liturgy we minister to one another. In our hospitality to stranger and friend we embody the reality celebrated in the

liturgy. We are the ongoing symbolic encounter of Christ in the world. At the end of the eucharistic liturgy we are sent forth. We are dismissed to live this reality in our daily lives. We are formed and transformed in order to form and transform our world. We do this to the extent that we are formed in our liturgies, which is why our celebrations must be done with care. They must be the fullest, most complete expression of our faith because they form us into the reality of Christ and they send us forth to call the world to its heart. How can we communicate the reality of Christ in the world if we cannot communicate this reality in our liturgies? How can we hope to work for justice and peace in the world unless we treat one another with justice and peace in our celebrations? How can we act as the most complete symbol of what it means to be Church if we don't embrace symbols and use them to

their fullest in our Eucharists? What we do on Sunday is not an escape from the world; rather it embodies most completely what we are called to do in the world: the truth we are to speak, the life we are to live.

This truth, this life, is the truth and life of Christ whose mission we serve. We are to live what we have celebrated by caring for those in need, for the poor, the sick, the voiceless. The eucharistic liturgy forms the Church and we who are Church are then to confront—and embrace—society with the reality of Christ. We are to live as a challenge to the world and to act for its transformation, for peace and justice and the full establishment of the kingdom of God.

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#### Work Cited

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