

5. Sign and Symbol

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“Is the presence of Christ in the bread and wine real or a symbol?” If you ask that question, most Catholics will say it is real. In fact, it is both real and a symbol. The question is a poor question, because it considers “symbol” and “real” to be opposites. A symbol is all about reality.

The confusion comes because we often use the word “symbol” in English as if it were a mere sign. We speak of something being “only a symbol” or “merely symbolic.” Properly understood, however, symbols are much richer than signs. Though signs and symbols inhabit the same realm, they function differently.

A sign points us to something that is somewhere else. We see a billboard advertising new cars at a local dealer. We cannot buy the car from the billboard; it points us somewhere else. A sign normally gives us one simple message. It speaks on one level, giving us information in a fairly straightforward way.

A symbol, on the other hand, speaks on many levels at once. Scholars call symbols “multivalent,” because they communicate to us in several different ways at the same time. A wedding ring, which may function as a sign telling strangers simply that a person is married, means much more than that to the wearer or his or her spouse. Think of all the meaning it carries when a widow or widower whose spouse has died treasures it! A symbol can convey a whole range of experiences, far more than a single meaning. Symbols speak to our senses and minds and hearts at the same time.

A symbol also somehow contains what it symbolizes. Think of a kiss between lovers. It is a symbol of their love, but where is the love? Is it not contained, to some degree, in the kiss itself? The kiss does not exhaust their love, but the love is not somewhere else. The symbol contains the reality.

Sacraments, by definition, are symbolic realities. Our theological tradition says that sacraments cause by signifying. They operate in the realm of the symbolic. When we say that the Eucharist is the sacrament of Christ’s body and blood, we are saying that it is a symbolic form of Christ’s presence. But like all real symbols, the sacrament does not just point us to Christ somewhere else but somehow contains what it signifies. The Eucharist contains Christ’s presence, though it does not exhaust it. He is really there, though he is not restricted to that expression of his presence.

The *Baltimore Catechism* defined a sacrament as “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace.” Today we might define sacraments as symbols chosen by Christ to bear his presence. Though the older definition speaks of a sign, it is a sign that “gives grace,” which means it enables us to encounter Christ. Thus it is a sign that contains what it signifies, a symbol.

It is important to reaffirm our belief in the real presence of the Lord in all the ways that he is present in the Eucharist. But we should never deny the symbolic character of that real presence, for “sacrament” is another word for “sacred symbol.” Christ is present symbolically and sacramentally and really.

