



Describing Symbols and Rituals

Symbols are objects or actions (such as rituals) that evoke meanings beyond themselves. The object or ritual itself is concrete, such as water or a dance, and the meaning is abstract. Water, for example, may symbolize life (drinking water) or death (a flood) or cleansing (a bath). A ritual dance may be used by an indigenous culture as a rite of spring or a coming-of-age ceremony, to symbolize fertility or to represent the arrival of a young adult to full membership in the group. When words describing such objects or actions evoke other meanings, the words themselves become symbols. By connecting us with the world of sense perceptions, symbols also add power and depth to our words and stories.

Symbols participate in the abstract meaning for which they stand. Therefore, the symbols (including words) and rituals in sacramental celebrations communicate powerfully on many different levels. For example, in Baptism the sacramental object of water can actually be used for cleansing and nourishing. Water can also cause death. Pouring water over the head of or immersing the person to be baptized ritually evokes the meanings of cleansing, nourishing, and dying to an old life. Those who receive Baptism are truly cleansed of Original Sin and all human sin, and they truly die to an old life to be reborn to a new life in Christ.

Liturgical symbols are widely recognized symbols such as water, oil, bread and wine, and gestures. In contrast with all other symbols and rituals that evoke meanings beyond themselves, liturgical symbols and rituals evoke and mediate the Real Presence of Christ. By our fully conscious and active participation in the celebration of the sacraments, we are truly united with Christ and the Body of Christ, the Church.

- Describe a symbol in your own words.
- Describe a ritual in your own words.
- Why do we need concrete objects or actions to communicate abstract meanings and values that are important to us?
- Why are symbols important in storytelling?
- Describe an object or ritual that is used in a sacrament other than Baptism.
- Do you possess any special object that has symbolic meaning to you? How is this different from widely known symbols like water, fire, a journey, and so on?