

SYMBOLS

BY BRENNAN R. HILL

Catholics are strong in their belief that the power of Christ can be experienced through symbols. **Symbols are an integral part of life.** Humans are likely the only creatures capable of making symbols, and we shape them to convey meaning. My granddaughter Marie is three and already she draws a house and stick figures to represent her “mommy, daddy,” herself, and her baby sisters, Natalie and Lauren. These symbols show where Marie finds her security and happiness. Symbols have a power all their own. Language uses words as symbols to convey meaning. Once you have learned a language you know how

to use these symbols to convey what you want to say. For instance, the words “I love you” can generate powerful feelings.

But if we don’t know Spanish and someone says: “Te amo,” the meaning escapes us.

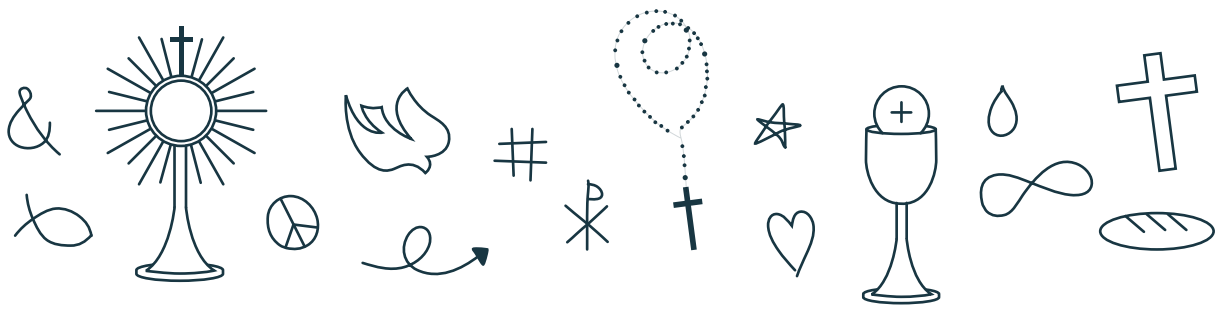


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Phrases like “I promise you” or “I forgive you” or “Get out of my life!” can reach deep into our hearts and feelings. And then there are some mysteries of life that are beyond everyday speech and we try to express them in the highly symbolic language of poetry. Gestures are also symbols. A kiss can just say “hello” or perhaps be an invitation to intimacy. A hug can express a greeting, whereas a long embrace can express a more serious relationship. A pat on the back or a high five can make us feel proud of our achievements. And, of course, people can be symbolic. A medic arriving at an accident is a powerful symbol of rescue; a firefighter pulling up to a burning home symbolizes safety. A friend who shows up when we are in the hospital symbolizes love and concern.

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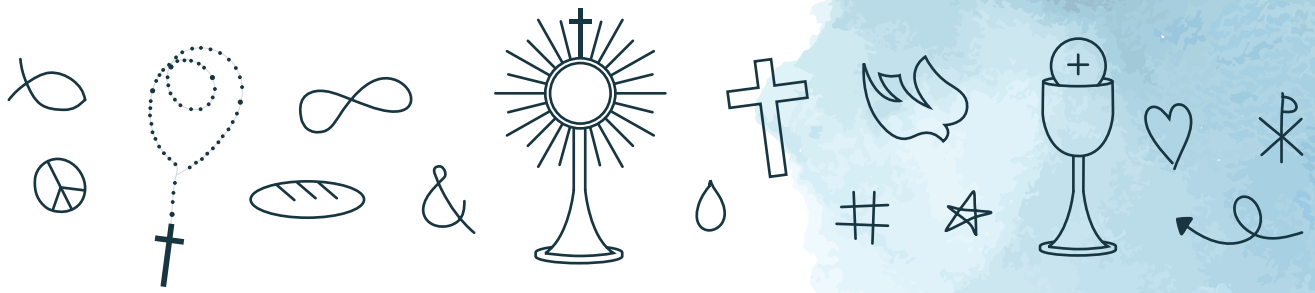


On a recent trip to Poland, I observed piles of rubble that drew me into the horrors of the Holocaust. These were the ruins of the crematoria and gas chambers in Auschwitz, which were blown up by the German Nazis in an attempt to cover up their atrocities. They were just piles of bricks, but extremely powerful symbols of the mystery of evil and human cruelty. They are symbols of the hatred that drove human beings to destroy millions of innocent lives with industrial efficiency. In a room there, one sees countless shoes of the victims, taken off just before they entered the gas chambers. Among these are many baby shoes and shoes of toddlers, as well as artificial limbs and canes! The meaning of all this, I must say, was beyond my comprehension, and to this day I am haunted by the experience of these symbols of death and destruction.

Sounds are also used as symbols to draw us into mystery. Recently I attended the burial of a marine killed in Iraq, the fiancé of one of my students. When Taps was played, I was drawn into the mystery of a life cut short, the grief of a lovely undergraduate, and experienced feelings of loss, patriotism, heroism, and the futility of war. I will never forget a similar

ceremony when Taps was played at the cemetery near the beaches of Normandy. There were ten thousand white markers on the graves of those who died in the 1945 invasion, which ended World War II. I was overwhelmed at the sight of the loss of so many young Americans and yet was inspired by their heroism and self-sacrifice. I can remember another sound, that of a siren, as we rushed a friend of mine off to a hospital for emergency surgery. Often when I hear a siren now, I am brought back to that experience and reminded of the anxiety, compassion for my friend, and fear that he wouldn't make it.

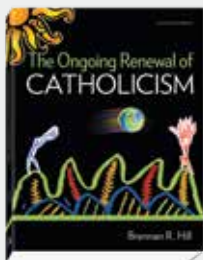
And we have our symbolic rituals. A dance can be a celebration of joy at a wedding or intimacy on an evening out. Thanksgiving dinner is a symbolic meal that can draw a family closer and provide a special time to share memories, greetings of "what's going on," and to welcome new young members with hugs. We surround ourselves with powerful symbols, engagement and wedding rings, flags, photos, souvenirs, songs, all of which can have the power to conjure memories and put us in touch with deep feelings. How many of us wear something around our necks or on



our fingers that are treasured symbols of loved ones past and present. The song laments, “You don’t bring me flowers anymore.” The symbols of love are gone and so seems to be the love itself. It is interesting to note that the word *symbol* comes from the Greek word *synballien*, which means “to put together.” It comes from the ancient Greek practice of making contract or covenant. Each person in the agreement was given a piece of the same object. At any given time, they could reconvene and match their pieces to show that each was a part of the original deal. The same applies to our use of symbols today. **For a symbol to be effective, there has to be an agreed-upon meaning shared by the participants.** Picture a couple celebrating their fiftieth anniversary together at their favorite restaurant.

They hold hands across the table and the husband gently fingers his wife’s diamond wedding ring. The symbolic ring puts them in touch with the mysteries of their lives together: the love, the struggles, the child raising. The ring has the power to draw them into fifty years of sharing in the covenant they began so many years ago and also gives them hope for more years ahead.

Sacraments, as we shall see, are similar: they are powerful and yet unique symbols that link us with the power of God and with our covenant with others. **Sacraments are about communication with God and others.** Sacraments are about community with God and others. And these profound and powerful symbols are concerned with propelling us into a way of life and action for others.



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