



SYMBOLS AND RITUALS

BY JOANNA DAILEY

In understanding the sacraments, it helps to look first at the importance of symbols and rituals. We use symbols and rituals every day, almost without realizing it. One example of a set of symbols we use every day is language. When people have a shared language, they have a shared understanding of what words mean. If we share the meanings of words, we can communicate our thoughts and ideas. Through language, we can turn what is within us (our thoughts and feelings) into something outside us that can affect or

influence others. It is hard to imagine how different our lives would be without language.

Yet, however wonderful language is, sometimes words are not enough. Where our deepest thoughts and feelings are concerned, we all sometimes need to be shown the meaning of words. And this is not a bad attitude to have. Saint John, the beloved disciple of Christ, wrote to his community in the first century, "Children, let us love not in word or speech but in deed and truth" (1 John 3:18). Love is a verb. Love is not only thinking and feeling but also doing.

Making Symbols, Doing Rituals

Because we have a need to act out our deepest thoughts and feelings, we are naturally symbol-makers and ritual-doers. On Valentine's Day, saying "I love you" is not enough for us. We want to share something tangible like a card and flowers or a box of candy. When we meet someone, we use both words and gestures (a handshake or another kind of ritual) to show our friendliness. When we have finished a course of studies, we could just receive a certificate in the mail that says our studies are complete, but instead we have a graduation ceremony, complete with songs, speeches, invited guests, and a personal handing over of a beautifully printed diploma (probably with a handshake as well). **Words are not always enough.** We are human. We need action. We need symbols and rituals to act out what we really mean.

Symbols and Rituals Defined

Symbols and rituals are related, but they are not exactly the same thing. The word symbol comes from a Greek word meaning "to throw together." **A symbol "throws together" the literal meaning of an object or action with other meanings that it evokes.** For example, in the Sacrament of Baptism, water is water. It is a combination of hydrogen and oxygen. But it also evokes other meanings, like washing, cleansing, and purifying. Thus, water becomes a symbol of something more than itself. The symbol of water invites us to look beyond the liquid to its deeper meanings. A ritual is an established pattern of actions, usually including words. The words and actions have symbolic meaning, so **"symbolic action" is another way to refer to a ritual.** Rituals can be simple, such as a handshake, a wave, or the Sign of the Cross. They can also be more complex, such as the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games or the inauguration of a president. Because the liturgy and the sacraments involve symbols with words and actions, we call them rituals.



Sacraments, Symbols, and Rituals

Why are we symbol-makers and ritual-doers? Because God made us this way. **When God communicates with us, he does not use words alone.** And when we respond to him, we do not use words alone. The fact that God communicates with us and we respond through everyday life in the world makes life itself sacramental. The Church holds a sacramental view of all reality. Yet one of God's best ways of communicating with us is through liturgical celebrations, especially in the Seven Sacraments. And our participation in these sacraments is one of the best ways we can respond to him.

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