

VOLUME 3, ISSUE 1

# ASPIRE

A MAGAZINE FOR HIGH SCHOOL RELIGION TEACHERS



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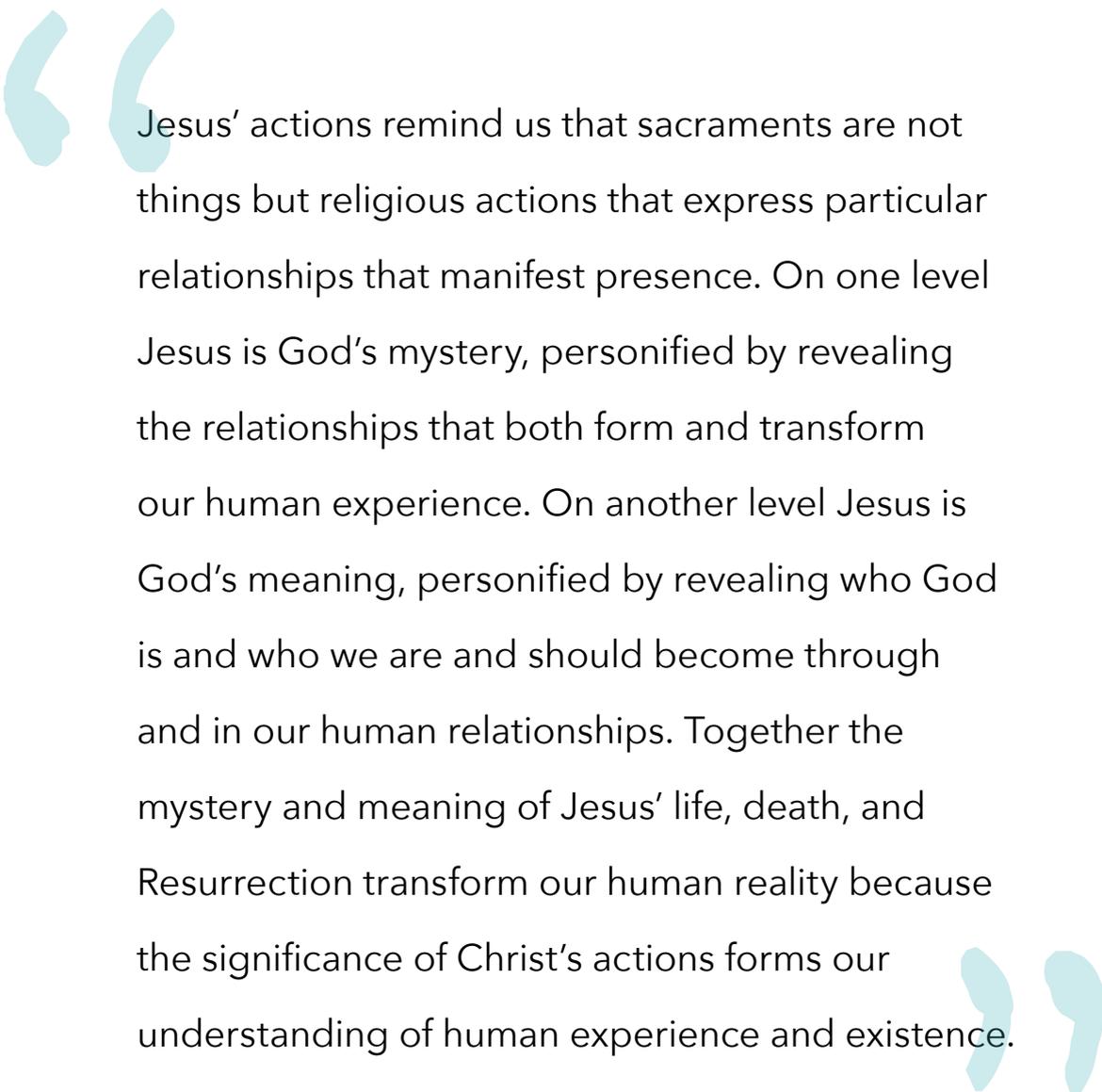
Describing and  
Defining Sacraments

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Symbols and Rituals

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Sacraments as Signs  
of Redemption



Jesus' actions remind us that sacraments are not things but religious actions that express particular relationships that manifest presence. On one level Jesus is God's mystery, personified by revealing the relationships that both form and transform our human experience. On another level Jesus is God's meaning, personified by revealing who God is and who we are and should become through and in our human relationships. Together the mystery and meaning of Jesus' life, death, and Resurrection transform our human reality because the significance of Christ's actions forms our understanding of human experience and existence.

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## FROM THE EDITOR



More than a year through a pandemic has left many of us longing for experiences of Church. Celebrations that were once large communal events—Baptisms, Eucharistic liturgies, First Communion, weddings, and even funerals—became small and often isolated gatherings.

Sacraments are meant to bring us together. The symbols and rituals give meaning to these important rites and passages, and the community is one of the strongest symbols in every sacramental celebration. The gathered moments of community we share in church form us into a sacramental people. Sharing meals, forgiving one another, mourning together, and loving one another become possible because of God's grace. These are holy moments. Through them, we feel closer to God and to one another.

As you gather for a new school year, in whatever form, may this same grace bless your ministry. In this issue, we've curated articles and classroom activities that revisit the power of the sacraments. Diving deeper into the power of symbols will help give meaning to our everyday experiences. That will, in turn, make our sacramental celebrations richer.

Like bread, we are blessed and broken. May the 2021–2022 school year help us to recall and celebrate all the blessings of the previous year. May it also heal our community from any brokenness that came about because of physical and social isolation.

Be assured of our prayers for you. And thank you, again, for walking with young people and for helping them discover grace in their own lives.

*Julie Mickler*

## ABOUT THE PUBLISHER

Saint Mary's Press is a nonprofit, Lasallian Catholic publisher administered by the Christian Brothers of the Midwest District. Our focus is a contemporary expression of the Catholic Church's mission to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and the Lasallian mission to provide a human and Christian education for young people, including those who are economically deprived. With our partners in schools, parishes, and families, we share the Good News of Jesus Christ with Catholic Christian children and young people through publications and services.

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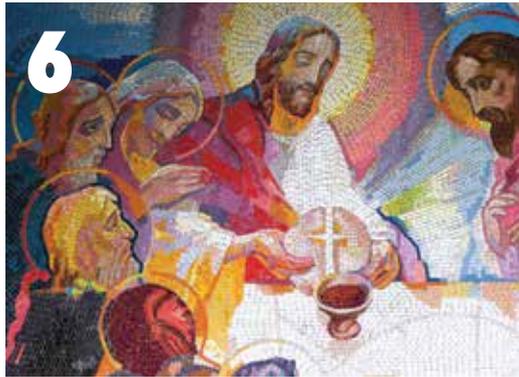
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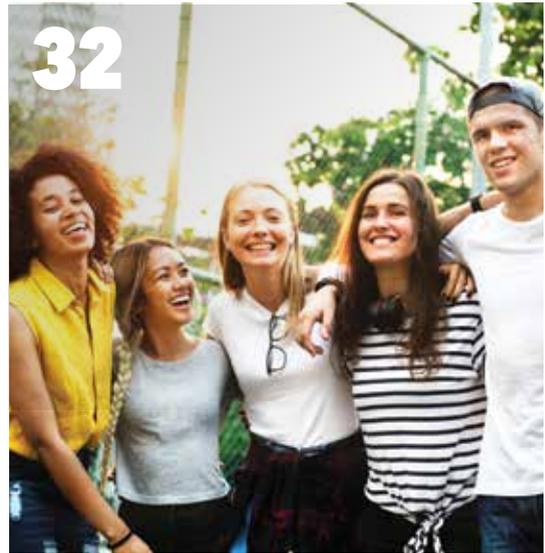


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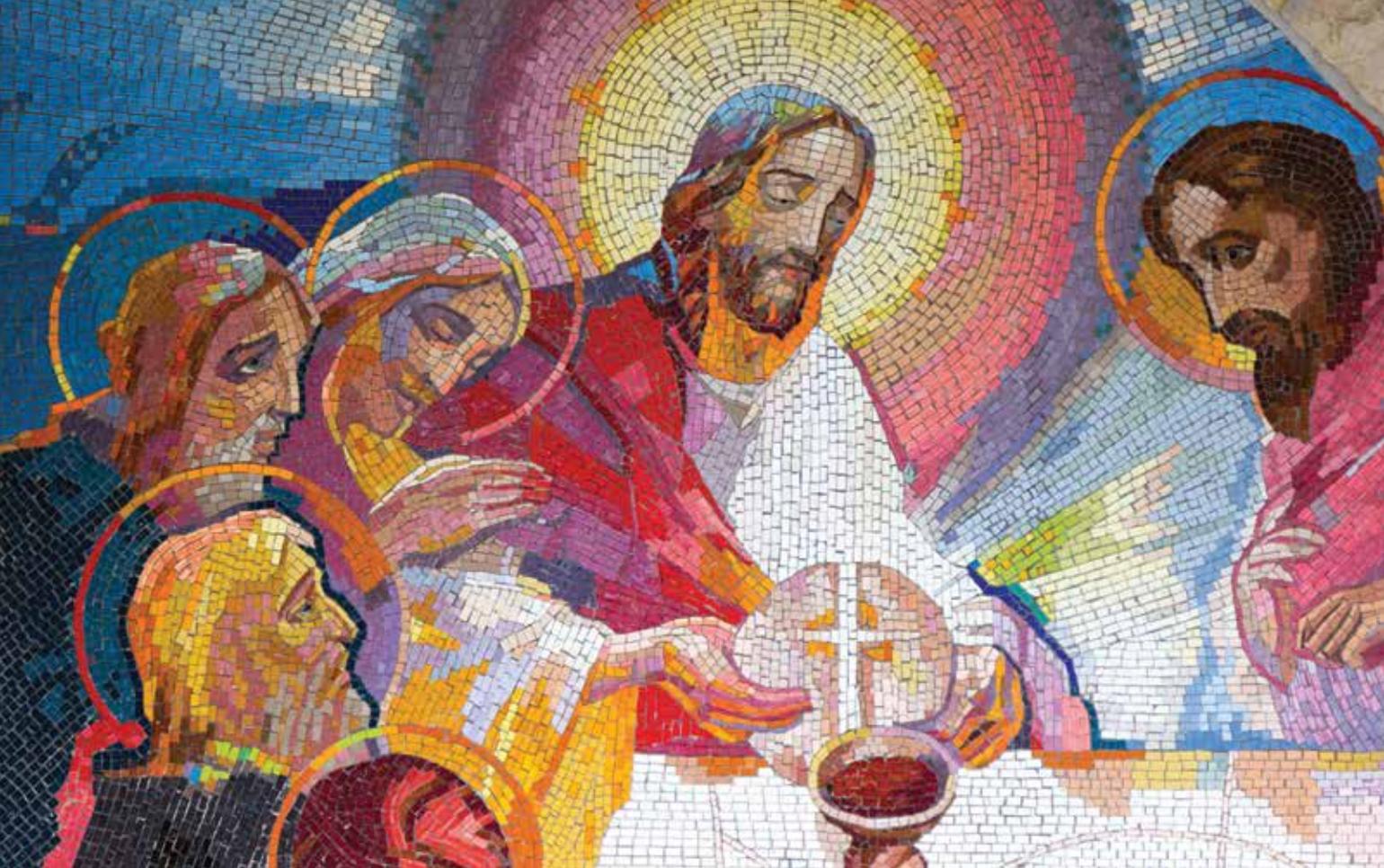
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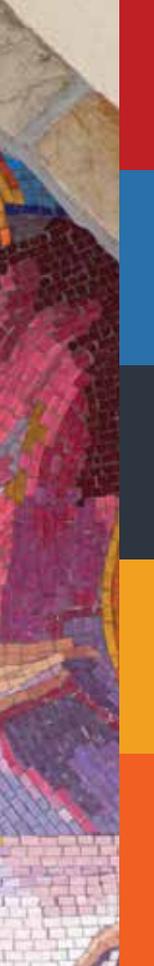
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### Love One Another as I Have Loved You



# Describing and Defining Sacraments

By Jay M. Hammond



Like signs and symbols, the sacraments are about the mystery of a threefold communication: from God to humans, from humans to God, and among humans in community. The very idea of communication implies relationship and interpretation. Thus, when one reads or hears the word *sacrament*, for example, at the Liturgy of the Eucharist during the Mass when the bread and wine are elevated, broken, distributed, and so on, one should ask: **“To what do the signs/symbols point? What do the signs/symbols communicate? How do the signs/symbols cultivate relationships?”** These may seem like simple questions, but if they are overlooked and left unanswered, then the meaning of the sacraments will remain individually and communally obscure, confusing, and boring.

Moreover, signs and symbols provide the “content” for sacramental rituals, and those ritual actions, communally celebrated, supply the “context” for interpreting and understanding the significance of the sacraments. Such an understanding of the sacraments parallels the idea that the signs and symbols we use involve both our individual interpretations and the communal contexts that shape our perceptions. Thus, fuller participation in the sacraments requires that we understand both because to miss either the “content” of the sacraments’ symbolism or the “context” of their communal celebration is to decrease their ability to convey meaningful communication.

Roman Catholics call their symbolic rituals “rites” (content), which they celebrate during the liturgy (context). While a rite describes the prescribed actions and words needed for administering a sacrament, the liturgy is the actual celebration of a sacrament by the community. Since all relationships require the work of the participating members, the liturgy, communicated through and in its symbolic rituals, is a special and significant locus for the reciprocal “work” that unveils the mystery of the divine human encounter. In this relationship, **the work is primarily God’s action, but it also involves the participatory work of the community to love and serve God and neighbor.** A better understanding of how “sacramental language” describes and expresses these relationships can open up a greater appreciation of and participation in the sacramentality of all created reality.

## Defining a Sacrament

All world religions have sacraments, but only Christians call them sacraments<sup>1</sup>. Most Christian churches celebrate sacraments, but there is a wide spectrum of understandings on the number and meaning of the sacraments.

Historically, while the term *sacrament* comes from the Latin word *sacramentum*, the concept has much to do with its Greek equivalent, *mysterion*. *Mysterion* means “something hidden or secret,” which has been retained today with the word mystery. Thus, even before Christianity began, **the term *mysterion* described an experience of the divine or God’s activity in human affairs.**

Thus, *mysterion* was also closely linked with the idea of revelation; that is, God’s revelation is a mystery. These two concepts of mystery and revelation are common in both Hebrew and Christian Scriptures, especially Ephesians and Colossians. However, it was not until the third century that theologians Clement and Origin explicitly applied the meaning of *mysterion* to Christian ritual practices. Today, *mysterion* points to the fact that the core meaning of the symbolic rituals we now call sacraments involves mystery and revelation of God’s self-communication.

An important development in this discussion happened in the third century when the theologian Tertullian sought to translate *mysterion* into Latin. He chose the word *sacramentum*, which means a “sacred oath” taken by a recruit joining the Roman army. In the same way the soldier uttered *sacramentum* to the emperor, who was considered a deity, the Christian pledges a sacred oath to

Christ. Thus, Tertullian used *sacramentum* to mean a religious initiation into the Christian community via baptism and Eucharist, which were both a sign of initiation and the means of sanctification. Today, *sacramentum* points to the fact that the core meaning of the symbolic rituals we now call sacraments involves an initiation into a community of believers that seek experience of God’s mystery.

Following Tertullian was the fifth-century Augustine of Hippo. He developed the notion that a *sacramentum* is a sign that sanctifies because it is efficacious, meaning that the sign produces an intended effect or that it is effective. For example, Christ and the Spirit make effective, through grace, the cleansing that water signifies. Thus, for those with faith, baptism purifies by grace. Augustine did not only consider religious rituals to be *sacramenta* but he listed over three hundred sacraments. The church would gradually pare back the number of sacraments by distinguishing between those celebrated as symbolic rituals by the community, which were retained as sacraments, and those that came to be identified as sacramentals, that is, signs and practices that assist persons in their devotion and prayer (e.g., genuflection, crossing oneself, and a rosary). Nevertheless, **Augustine’s towering influence on Western Christianity framed the understanding of the sacraments as sacred signs.** Thus, when the twelfth-century theologian Peter Lombard (France, d. 1160) devised the technical definition that states, “A sacrament is a sign of a sacred thing that is capable of conveying the grace of which it is a sign” (*Liber Sententiarum* IV, d. 1 c. 4),



he was largely following in the footsteps of Augustine. Today, the medieval technical definition of a sacrament points to the fact that **only those symbolic rituals that confer the grace they signify are called sacraments.**

The history of the terms *mysterion* and *sacramentum* demonstrate that sacraments involve (1) the mystery of the divine-human encounter wherein God reveals the divine presence, (2) the initiation of a believer into a communal participation of that divine-human

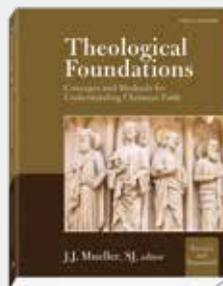
encounter, and (3) the faith community's active celebration of those symbolic rituals that confer the grace they signify.

With these three points in mind, a sacrament can be theologically defined as a symbolic ritual comprised of words, gestures, and material signs (bread, wine, water, oil, etc.) that points to and manifests Jesus' own actions, for the purpose of communicating God's grace to those who, by faith, perform and participate in their action.

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1. Martos, Joseph. *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church*. Revised and updated. Liguori/Triumph, 2001.

*This article is an excerpt from Grace and Sacraments: The Mystery of the Divine-Human Encounter, by Jay M. Hammond, in Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith, edited by J.J. Mueller, SJ (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic, 2007, 2011), pages 190–192. Copyright © 2007, 2011 by Anselm Academic. All rights reserved. [www.anselmacademic.org](http://www.anselmacademic.org)*



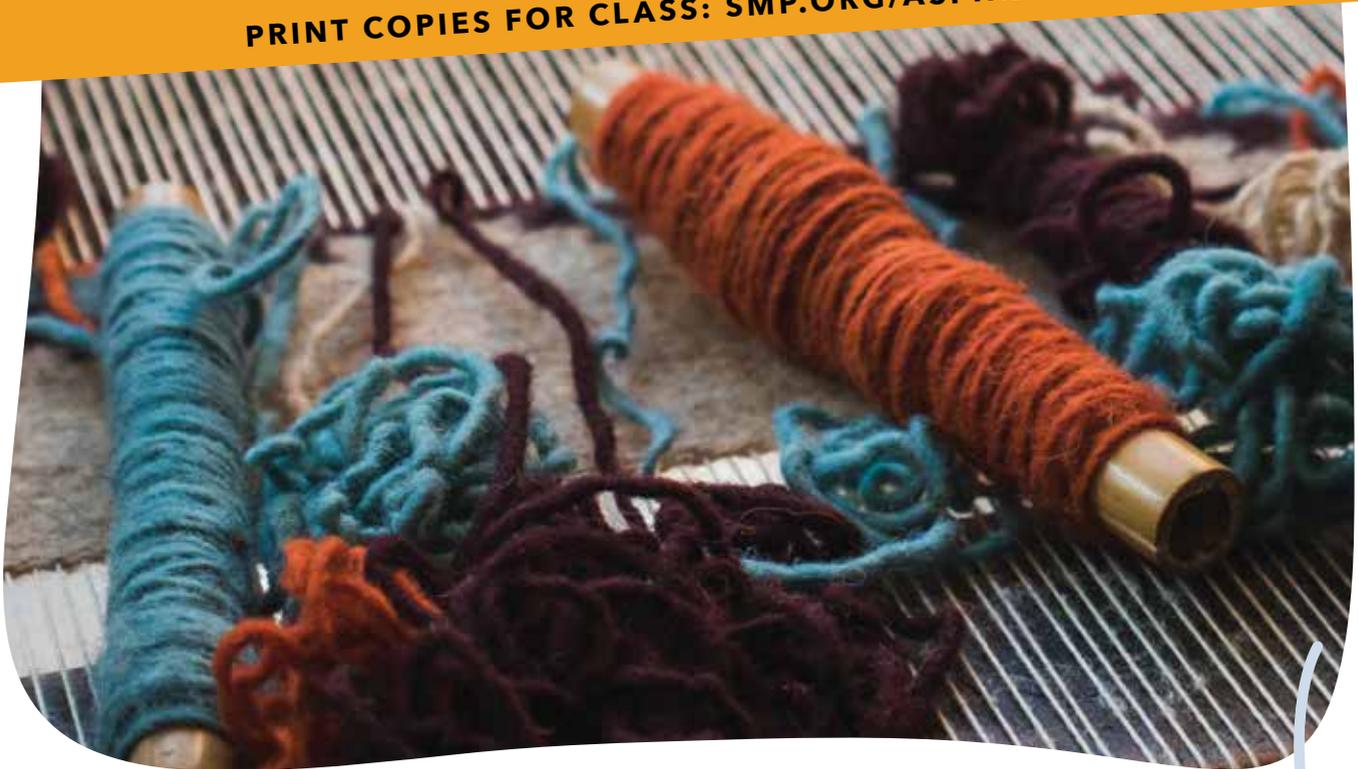
Jay M. Hammond holds a PhD in historical theology from Saint Louis University. His interests include medieval Christianity, Franciscan thought, and sacramental theology.



## A Sacred Tapestry

The following prayer was written by a teen who believes that all creation is a sacred tapestry reflecting God's abundant love. Chris prays for open eyes so he can more clearly see God's wonderful and mysterious plan unfold in his life.

Come Holy Spirit,  
Give me the right words to say and the right heart to pray.  
God, you gave us the Sacraments as visible signs of your invisible power,  
grace, and love.  
Open my eyes to see that everything around me is like a little sacrament,  
a little sign of your incredible love.  
Right here, right now, you are telling me that you love me.  
In the sunshine, in the air passing through my nose,  
in every thought passing me by, in every heartbeat,  
in every person you've placed in my life.  
Sometimes it seems like the threads of my life are tangled.  
Even now I don't know which way I'm going.  
Sometimes the threads seem to fray or even break.  
But I trust you.  
I know there is a great plan beyond my comprehension.  
A great symphony beyond my understanding.  
A great tapestry beyond my sight.  
Every tangled thread is actually another weave knit by you.  
You have created me and every day you are transforming my life  
into a work of art—your labor of love for me.  
No matter how difficult, how confusing, how dark things may get;  
your love is there in every thread, in every person, in every breath,  
even to my very last, when we will finally meet again.  
Amen.



**Use the following questions as creative prompts. Invite your students to draw their life's sacred tapestry. When finished, the students can share their tapestry in pairs.**

Think of your life as a sacred tapestry and God as the designer gradually weaving the plan together. What patterns do you notice in your sacred tapestry? What "threads" have formed you to be the person you are today?

- Where might you see God's abundant love reflected in your tapestry?
- Who are the important people who have accompanied you and are additional threads in your sacred tapestry?
- What hints about your future are evident in your tapestry?
- In what ways can you acknowledge your tapestry as a work of art?



**UNDERSTANDING  
CATHOLICISM**

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# 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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Joanna Dailey has been involved in education and in Catholic publishing for almost forty years. Her journey in religious and liturgical education began when, at the age of seven, she began matching the pictures in her prayer book with the words (in Latin) and actions of the priest at Mass. Along the way, she has earned two master's degrees: one from Fordham University in religious education and one from Bank Street College of Education in infant/toddler education.



## Describing Symbols and Rituals

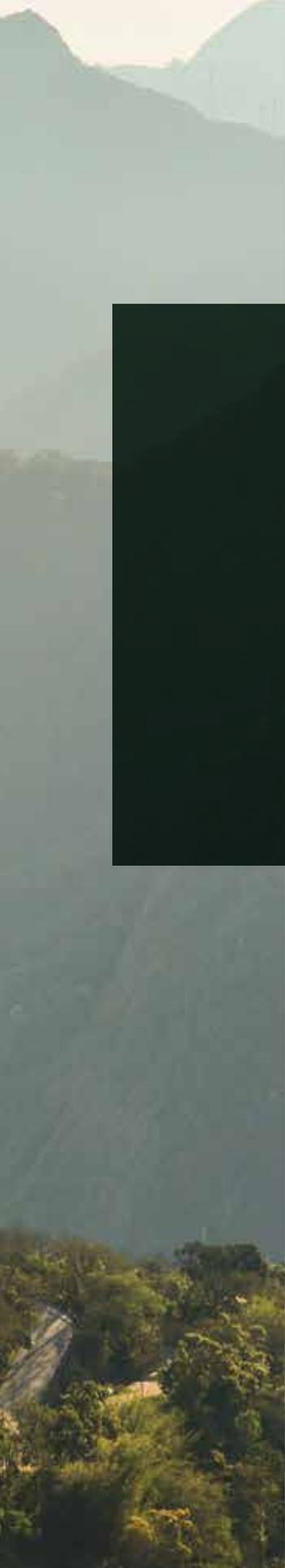
Symbols are objects or actions (such as rituals) that evoke meanings beyond themselves. The object or ritual itself is concrete, such as water or a dance, and the meaning is abstract. Water, for example, may symbolize life (drinking water) or death (a flood) or cleansing (a bath). A ritual dance may 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?





# SACRAMENTS AS SIGNS OF REDEMPTION

BY JOANNA DAILEY

We do not often use the word *redeem* in ordinary life, but it has its moments. We redeem coupons at a store. We might say something like, “This old table was redeemed from the scrap heap” or “This afternoon I am going to the dry cleaner to redeem my shirts.” What can we learn from these uses of the word *redeem*? Generally, we can say that to redeem something implies taking something from one state of being to another. A coupon is just another piece of paper until we redeem it and get some value in return. An old table is doomed until someone with a good eye redeems it and makes it useful and valuable again. Shirts will stay at the dry cleaner forever unless their owner comes and redeems them—gets them back to his closet where they belong.

## TO BUY BACK

The word *redeem* comes from a Latin word meaning “to buy back” or “to purchase.” Meanings for the word *redemption* include “deliverance” or “rescue.” At the time of Jesus, this is what many of the People of God were looking for. They were a conquered people, being ruled by the Romans. Faithful Jews were awaiting the Messiah who would deliver them from their oppression. It was at this time that God chose to send his Son into the world as its rescuer, its deliverer, and its redeemer, not just for the Jews but for all people. As Jesus himself said, he did not come to destroy the Old Law but to fulfill it. When people were tithing their harvests of herbs and spices to give one tenth to the Temple, as the Law directed, he did not object. He commended them. But he also warned them not to neglect the bigger things, like mercy and fidelity. Jesus accused the leaders of being blind guides who were straining out gnats but swallowing camels (see Matthew 23:23–24)! In the New Law, **Jesus gives us the grace of the Holy Spirit to reform our hearts to love as he does** and to carry out God’s commandments.

The People of God at the time of Jesus definitely needed redemption. They needed to be brought back to the truth about God and about themselves and into a graced relationship with God, freed from the burden of sin. So that was the mission of Jesus: to conquer sin and death, to redeem his people, and to bring them back to God, in freedom and in truth.

## WHAT ABOUT US?

**Are love and faithfulness gaining ground in our time, in our lives?** Are we concentrating on the bigger things in our lives and in our world? Or are we straining out gnats while swallowing camels? You may have heard the saying “Don’t sweat the small stuff.” Keep the bigger picture—what life is really about—in mind. How are you doing on that? Fortunately for us, the teachings of Jesus and his work of redemption did not die in the tomb. His work of redemption reaches people of all times and all places.

Joanna Dailey has been involved in education and in Catholic publishing for almost forty years. Her journey in religious and liturgical education began when, at the age of seven, she began matching the pictures in her prayer book with the words (in Latin) and actions of the priest at Mass. Along the way, she has earned two master’s degrees: one from Fordham University in religious education and one from Bank Street College of Education in infant/toddler education.



# CLASSROOM APPLICATION



## Instructor notes:

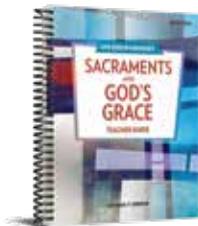
**Distribute** the following two handouts. Use this exercise to guide the students to become more conscious of the human need for redemption. Have the students complete part 1 in silence. Consider playing instrumental music as they work. You can have them complete part 2 as a class or in small groups.

**Comment** on Part 1: "If you agreed or strongly agreed with a number of these items, you are like most people. This brief exercise helps to remind us that none of us is self-sufficient; we are all in need of redemption. Now we will discuss the questions in part 2 of the exercise as a class (or in small groups)."

**Continue** the discussion by asking the students the following questions:

- Do you believe our world is in need of redemption? What might redemption look or feel like?
- Do you believe you need redemption? What does personal redemption look or feel like?

**Conclude** with these or similar words: "We profess Jesus continues to be with us, to walk with us on the journey of life, through the sacraments. In faith, we believe that Jesus has redeemed us through our Baptism. And we also believe that Jesus' presence and unconditional love continues to redeem us in the Eucharist. Finally, in faith we also believe that Christ will redeem us and carry us to our eternal home."



*This activity is from Sacraments and God's Grace Teacher Guide, by Michael T. Greene, (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press, 2021), page 56. Copyright © 2021, Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.*

# The Meaning of Redemption: A Matter of Unconditional Love (Part 1)

The following survey provides an opportunity for you to identify some areas of your life that you feel you need help to improve. Part 1 of this exercise is strictly personal; however, your reflections will help you with the group exercise that follows in part 2. Place a check mark in the box that best describes how you feel about each statement.

I need help with...	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Unsure	Agree	Strongly Agree
believing that I am an intelligent person.					
doing my best in school.					
expressing myself clearly.					
making friends.					
gaining respect from my peers.					
gaining respect from adults.					
feeling good about my appearance.					
showing my love and affection to others.					
liking myself.					
treating my friends better.					
respecting my body.					
dealing with sexual issues.					
trusting people.					
loving others as they deserve.					
depending on God for more help.					



## The Meaning of Redemption: A Matter of Unconditional Love (Part 2)

Allow the students 10 minutes to individually answer all the discussion questions. When time is up, lead a large-group discussion soliciting answers to the following questions. Use your own follow-up questions to make it a conversation and not just reporting answers. "Say more about that ..." is a great way to invite students to dig a little deeper.

- Do you believe that love is gaining ground in our time? Give evidence for your answer.
- Describe anything you have experienced or read about that you believe has stifled or continues to stifle love or faithfulness.
- Describe anything you have experienced or read about that has nurtured love or faithfulness.
- If Jesus were in this room, inviting you to request anything you need to make the world a more loving and faithful place, what would you ask for?
- Do you think we need God's presence and help to positively change the world?
- Do you think that people in general are in need of redemption? What might redemption look like? Explain.

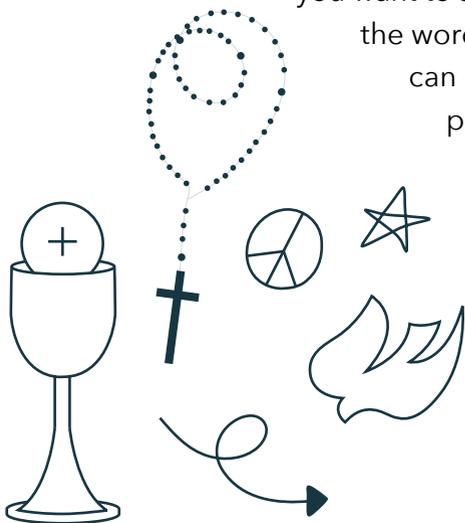
# SYMBOLS

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.

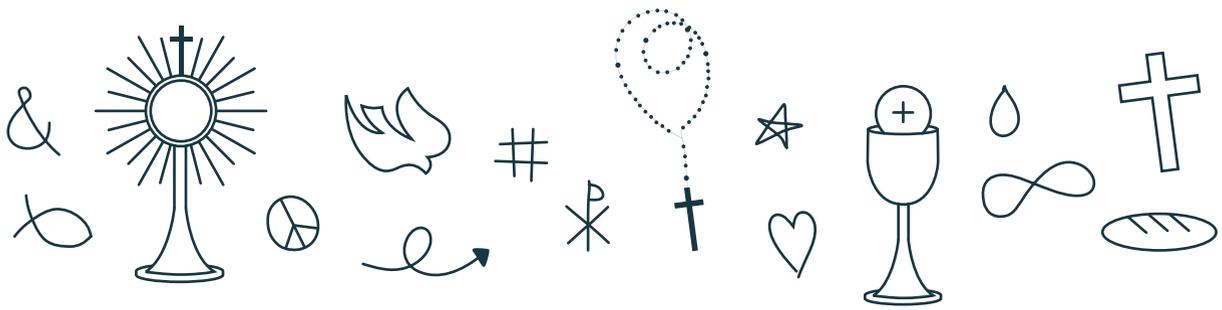


Symbols have the power to draw us into the mysteries of life and reality.

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.

Symbols have the power to draw us into the mysteries of life and reality.



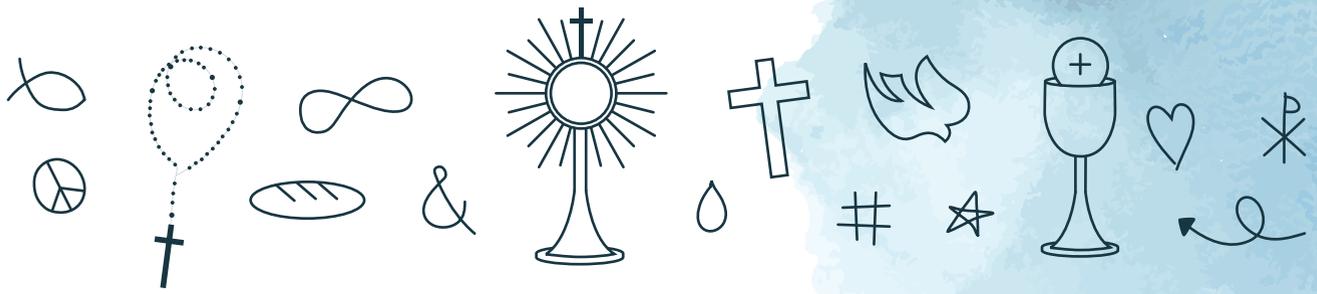


On a recent trip to Poland, I observed piles of rubble that drew me into the horrors of the Holocaust. These were the ruins of the crematoria and gas chambers in Auschwitz, which were blown up by the German Nazis in an attempt to cover up their atrocities. They were just piles of bricks, but extremely 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.

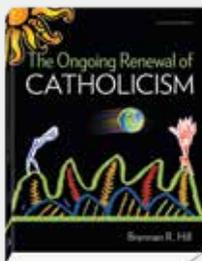
And we have our symbolic rituals. A dance can be a celebration of joy at a wedding or intimacy on an evening out. Thanksgiving dinner is a symbolic meal that can draw a family closer and provide a special time to share memories, greetings of "what's going on," and to welcome new young members with hugs. 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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# ENGAGEMENT *in the age of*

BY BRIAN SINGER-TOWNS

In the Gospel of Matthew Jesus tells his disciples, “Then every scribe who has been instructed in the kingdom of heaven is like the head of a household who brings from his storeroom both the new and the old” (13:52). Jesus of course was talking about how his disciples would take the truths of the Old Covenant and teach them in light of the New Covenant revealed by Jesus. It has struck me that in this pandemic we modern disciples face something similar, not in terms of content but in terms of method. Long story short, here are three “old” truths about educational methodology that the pandemic has challenged me to implement in new ways.

## **Help Students Discover Their Voice**

**I believe in the importance of having students give voice to what they are learning**, what they are wondering, and what they yet don't understand. It is hard in a face-to-face classroom for many students to do this. Many reasons—shyness, embarrassment, distraction—contribute to this. Sometimes it feels like pulling teeth to get students to say a few words. But in the Zoom space, I have found it easier to deal with this.

The chat box in Zoom (or whatever platform you are using) can be your best friend for this. I use it frequently to have young people post their reactions, answers, and questions. It's a great way to encourage everyone to contribute and

gives me a record that I can refer to and build on. And when I want to ensure anonymity, I just ask the students to reply to me using the private option. I've found both the quantity and quality of sharing have improved compared to face-to-face meeting time.

## **Try, Teach**

When I was first learning to create digital learning experiences, the constant message was to use the Try, Teach methodology. That is, don't start with a reading or video delivering the content, but start with an interaction that “tests” the user on the content. It took me a while to wrap my head around this, because as a student most of my learning was in the teach first, then try, methodology. But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Just watch any child play a video game. They don't spend hours reading about the game's rules and mechanics. They just dive in and start playing, learning along the way.

The Kahoot quiz app has been my best friend in applying the Try, Teach method during the pandemic. (If you have never used, it go to [kahoot.com](https://kahoot.com) to check it out.) I use it by just sharing screens in a Zoom session! It's even better than playing Kahoot in a face-to-face class because it eliminates the advantage of some students sitting closer to the screen if you don't have a large projection screen in

# DISTANCE LEARNING

your meeting space. I start most of my sessions with a Kahoot activity—sometimes just a few questions, sometimes twenty or more. The students love playing, and they retain more knowledge. I can follow each question with a short teaching as needed, often eliminating the need for a content presentation.

Whether in person or through distance learning, employing discovery through the Try, Teach method makes learning much more engaging for all!

## Encourage Students to Lead

I'm a strong believer in encouraging student leadership in educational settings. We all know the truth that if you really want to master some knowledge or skill, teach it to someone else. By putting a student in a teaching leadership role—whether that be as a facilitator or content expert—their potential to master the teaching is greatly increased.

The breakout rooms in Zoom are a great resource for encouraging student leadership.

In those breakout rooms, I often have students take the lead. I might have one student take the “hot seat” and respond to the other student’s questions as they think Jesus would respond, or the Holy Spirit, or the bishop. I often marvel at the student’s wisdom and understanding when doing this! I also ask students to create their own questions about the topic and put them in the chat box. Then we take turns answering them together. In these smaller groups, there is the opportunity—and the emotional safety—for each student to take a leadership role.

Teaching effectively during the pandemic has been a tremendous challenge. If there is a silver lining, it might be that it has forced us to explore what works in distance learning. **Even after the pandemic, it seems that distance learning will continue in some form or another**, becoming another tool in our teaching repertoire. We hope these three ideas spark your own creative reflection—possibly with colleagues—about how best to achieve your educational goals in distance-learning settings.

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# Encountering the *Other*

BY ELLEN KONECK

As far as I know, there are two ways to encounter the otherness of others: with curiosity or with judgment. During the pandemic, to survive as individuals and as a community, we have learned to keep our distance. Strangely, we have become like strangers—wearing masks and keeping distance—as a mode of solidarity, a way of being together, of being for one another.

In this sense, **all the ways we've become like strangers are rooted in empathy.** Empathy is the ability to enter the world of another person despite differences, distances, or distinct personalities; the ability to understand another person's thoughts, feelings, motivations, misperceptions and—through this understanding—share and even shoulder those things. In a way unmatched by previous generations, we have actually had the chance to know, more or less precisely, what life might really be like for others in lockdown this past year, because we've collectively shouldered the same weight of uncertainty. If we let it, the pandemic has been one long exercise in empathy.





The Incarnation and the Resurrection are the ultimate acts of empathy. They were God's way of sharing and shouldering our load. That Christ became human means we get to share in divine life too—and while we're still on this side of eternity, that sharing is most significant in the sacraments. Baptism, Confirmation, First Communion, yes; but I'm also thinking more broadly.

I'm thinking of the ways we encounter the otherness of others, with curiosity or with judgment. I'm thinking of the call for empathy embedded in the Christian life as a whole, with Christ as our model. I'm thinking of the way relationships themselves, this encountering, are sacramental.

Perhaps you already know the famous story of the time Thomas Merton stumbles upon

the sacramental nature of relationships when walking in Louisville, which he recounts in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*. He becomes overwhelmed with the realization of love for everyone at the busy intersection—the way even despite differences, distances, or distinct personalities, he was bound to and connected with all these so-called strangers on the street corner. His revelation broadens as he begins to realize that this connection to all other humans is precisely the way he is most connected to God too—because God became a member of the human race too. How Merton recognizes his connection to all other people is simple: grace. **That God has taken on our form means that any empathetic encounter is charged with the holy presence of God.** Our relationships—especially those unremarkable, daily ways we care for one another in small and simple ways—may be easy to take for granted. But they are sacraments in the truest sense: channels of grace that allow us to encounter God and be encountered, even through a mask, even at a distance.

Ellen Koneck is the head writer and editor at Springtide™ Research Institute. She has previously worked in book and magazine publishing and taught at a university in Connecticut. She has her master's degree in religion from Yale Divinity School and lives in Saint Paul, Minnesota, with her husband and toddler.

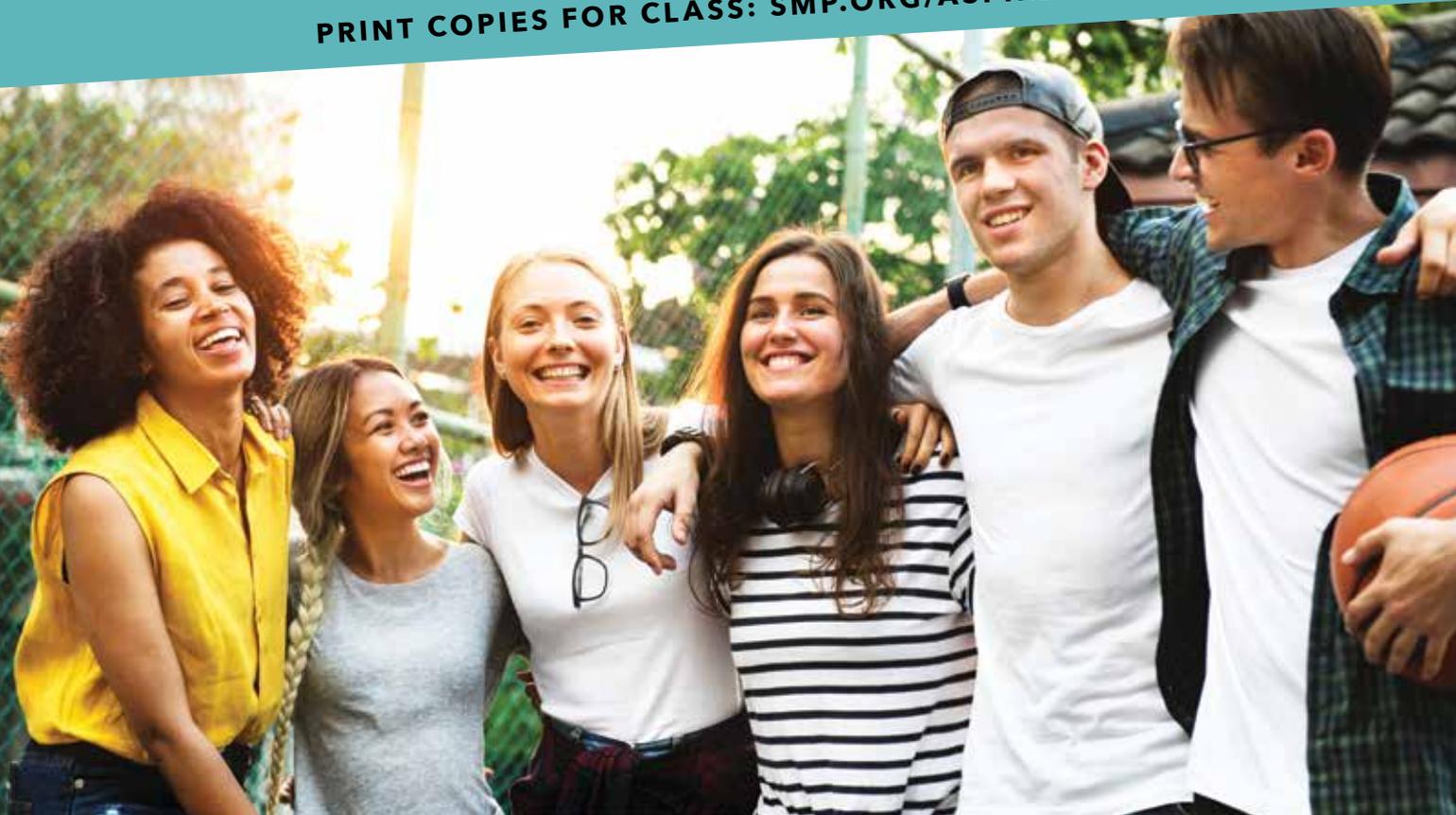




## SHOW AND TELL

**Symbols help us communicate meaning in our everyday lives. In this activity the students are asked to share an important event from their lives using an object as a symbol of their experience.**

- 1 Recall an important event that has shaped the person you are today.
- 2 Think of an object you could use as a symbol to describe this event to your classmates. Bring this object in for your show-and-tell presentation. (If your object is too big to carry, find an image of the object to display during your presentation.)
- 3 Prepare to tell your story about this important event by using your object as a symbol. Select at least four ways you can connect the physical qualities of your object to the important event. Here are some different ways to think about your object as a symbol:
  - How does the shape of the object relate to your important event?
  - How does the color of the object relate to your event?
  - How about the texture?
  - If your object has writing, numbers, or marks on it, how might these relate to your event?
  - If your object functions in a particular way, how might this functionality relate to your event?
- 4 Prepare a 2-minute show-and-tell presentation that “shows” your object” and “tells” the story of your important event.



Once everyone has presented, process the experience with these discussion prompts:

- How did using a symbolic object help you describe your important event?
- What creative ways did you use your objects as symbols in your storytelling?
- What do you think needs to happen to transform an everyday object into a meaningful symbol?
- What symbols are important in your everyday life? Why are they important? Explain by using examples.



*This activity was adapted from Understanding Catholicism: An Interactive Introduction to the Catholic Faith, (Winona, MN: Saint Mary's Press). Copyright © 2016, Saint Mary's Press. All rights reserved.*

# CLASSROOM IDEA

## PRAYER SERVICE:

# LOVE ONE ANOTHER AS I HAVE LOVED YOU

**Leader:** We pray with humble hearts in the name of God, who is Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier of the world. Let us bow our heads and pray for God's mercy (pause). Creator God, you are the giver of all gifts, yet we sometimes fail to show gratitude, care, or respect for all you have created, and so we pray:

**All: Creator of all, help us be humble stewards of all your gifts.**

**Leader:** Lord Jesus, you gave sight to the blind, yet we often choose not to see, and so we pray:

**All: Christ, our Lord and brother, give us new eyes to see.**

**Leader:** Sanctifier, Spirit of God, you inspired the prophets to speak for those who sometimes could not speak for themselves, and so we pray:

**All: Spirit of God, give us inspiration and a strong voice to speak on behalf of those who are marginalized or forgotten.**

**Leader:** God, our Creator, Redeemer, and Sanctifier, we gather as your children and as brothers and sisters to one another. We ask you to create in us new hearts, to open our eyes, and to make us one in your love. We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ, our Savior and Redeemer.

**All: Amen.**

**Lector:** Let us listen attentively to the Word of God from the Gospel of Luke.

*(The lector will read Luke 16:19–31, the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. When the reading is finished, the lector will say the following:)*

**Lector:** The Word of the Lord.

**All: Thanks be to God.**

*(Allow a moment of silence.)*

**Leader:** You are now invited to spend several minutes in silence to consider your own attitudes and actions toward those you may have considered to be outsiders or less than you in some way. You are also invited to pray for the grace to be able to walk in the shoes of those who are different from you.

**Music Leader:** *(Play an appropriate piece of music as background for the following reflection questions.)*

**Leader:** (Pause in between each question to give students time to process/reflect.)

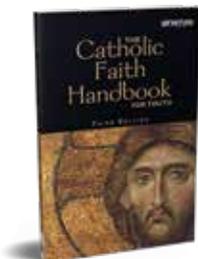
When have I been unable to show compassion or empathy for someone who is different from me? Have I judged a person because they were of a different race or a different religion? Is it because that person is poor or homeless? Is it because of that person's social status, gender identity, or sexual orientation? Do I treat any people as if they were less worthy than me?

How have my life experiences given me a unique insight into what it means to be marginalized? How can I use these experiences to create empathy for all those who are marginalized?

Let Jesus speak to us today as he spoke to his disciples. In the Gospel of John, Jesus says: "I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you should also love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples" (John 13:34–35).

**All: They will know we are Jesus' disciples by our love for one another. Alleluia!**

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“ Just as Jesus taught only the words of the Father (see John 8:28, 14:24), the Church should teach only the example of Christ, but because sinful humans comprise the Church, it often falls short of this realization. This fact should remind us that the Church is a sign of salvation, but that it is Christ through the Spirit’s activity that makes the sign effective. ”

*This quote is from Theological Foundations: Concepts and Methods for Understanding Christian Faith, edited by J.J. Mueller, SJ (Winona, MN: Anselm Academic 2007, 2011). Copyright © 2007, 2011 by Anselm Academic. All rights reserved. [www.anselmacademic.org](http://www.anselmacademic.org).*