

The Liturgical Symbols In The Life And Worship Of The Catholic Church - An Exposition

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Abstract: The Symbol is the essential element of communication. In the human world, there are various symbols used to express, understand and communicate ideas. In a liturgy, symbols, signs, gestures and actions are important factors. Humans always felt the need of symbols in their rituals and worships to communicate with the Divine. Through the symbols and signs in the liturgy, the greatness of God is brought closer to the smallness of humans. The liturgical symbols are great help for the humans to relate with the Divine and with the other humans. In this regard the Catholic Church is rich with enormous symbols associated with their liturgy. The liturgical symbols of Catholic Church are found in the liturgical calendar; the seasons around the liturgical year, in sacraments and sacramentals, and in the gestures and actions. The liturgical symbols are part and parcel of the life and the worship of the Catholic Church.

In humans' search for the Eternal in the temporal world, symbols are the point of humans' passage to the transcendent order in worship. This worship is the unifying focus of all that is the universe and the door to the vision of Absolute Reality. To realize this, the symbol must have a dual aspect: it must be fully human: the expression of his or her search for the ultimate meaning and at the same time has the stamp of God's self-disclosure to man. In the search for the Eternal, humans use the symbolic actions. Symbolic actions convey meaning which must be intelligible to all those who perceive the action. A rite or a ritual is a symbolic action. It is not just any type of action, it is symbolic by nature. One can wash oneself with the purpose of purifying oneself from the dust and sweat of the day. No one would consider such washing as a ritual. It becomes a ritual when the principal aim of the gesture is not bodily cleanliness but interior (spiritual) purity. There are religions without a developed doctrinal system or theology, but there is hardly a religion which does not find expression in ritual or liturgy.

I. INTRODUCTION

Symbols are everywhere in the human world. When two people meet each other their mutual recognition and pleasure will be shown in the gestures they exchange with each other according to the culture. Likewise, we use symbols everywhere and at all times. To give an example our language is a system of signs and symbols too. In the same way the world of culture is deeply symbolic, though the medium is verbal in poetry, tone in music, colour and form in painting, stone and shape in sculpture, and gesture and action in drama and dance. The same is true with the religion because we evoke the various images of the divine in the religion and the

rich narratives of this manifestation are found in the rituals that assure a communication between the human and the divine and many works of art in which people celebrate their spiritual experience¹.

II. THE LITURGICAL SYMBOLS IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

A. THE LITURGICAL SYMBOLS AROUND THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR

The calendar year often called the solar year, is simply a practical means of measuring the passage of time. Liturgical year is the temporal structure within which the Church celebrates the holy mysteries of her founder, Jesus Christ. "From the Incarnation and the Nativity to the Ascension, to Pentecost and to the wait in joyful hope for the Lord's coming" is the simple phrase which will bring in short the entire liturgical calendar. It is the time period of the birth, death and the resurrection of Jesus which is arranged in the liturgical calendar². It is calculated in part by the sun and moon. The Immoveable feasts such as Christmas and the feast of saints are based on the solar or secular calendar. Christmas, for example, is always on December 25.

B. THE SUNDAYS OF THE LITURGICAL YEAR

The celebration of Sunday is the memory of Jesus Christ who is the Lord and savior of Catholics. They consider the day as the Lord's Day. It is the day that the Lord, Jesus Christ is raised from death. Hence this celebration goes back to the oldest and most fundamental of all Christian activities. Sundays evolved around assemblies on the weekly anniversary of Christ's resurrection. They were called weekly *Pascha*, a weekly commemoration of the Paschal mystery.

III. THE CYCLE OF SEASONS IN THE LITURGICAL CALENDAR OF CATHOLICISM

Humans have always been sensitive to the cycle of seasons connected with the relationship of the sun to Earth. The cycle of seasons was so important that people associated divine mystery with it.

A. THE SEASON OF ADVENT

Advent (Latin *adventus*, "coming") originally described the whole mystery of the Incarnation: birth of Jesus Christ³, it is also a time of waiting, conversion and of hope. During this entire season the Catholic Church will reflect on how Jesus came into this world as a human being in four weeks. This reflection is done through the scriptures they read, liturgical actions they do and the preparations they accomplish. It is also a time of waiting, conversion and of hope. It is a time of waiting to remember the first and humble coming of the Lord, Jesus in our mortal flesh. It is also the waiting of supplication for His final glorious coming as Lord of History and universal Judge. It is the time of conversion by which we are prepared to receive the Lord. It is joyful hope that we will see him as he really is. In the following titles we will see the different symbols used during the season of Advent.

B. THE ADVENT WREATH

The most popular tradition today is the lighting of candles on an Advent wreath in both churches and homes. The Advent Wreath which may be of any size is made of evergreens and is placed on a table or suspended from the ceiling. There are four candles, one for each week of Advent. Three candles are violet or purple in color which is the traditional colour of Advent.

One candle is rose, the traditional colour of the Third Sunday of Advent, originally called *Gaudete* ("Rejoice"). The wreath symbolizes victory and glory. It represents victory over darkness. It also symbolizes the long duration of time when people lived in spiritual darkness waiting for the coming of the Messiah. Every Sunday of the season the candle is lit and the above said themes are reflected.

C. THE SYMBOL OF JESSE TREE

The Jesse Tree is the representation of the biblical persons associated with the gradual coming of the Messiah. The representation of Jesse Tree by the Advent tradition is named after the father of David. The symbols are gradually added to the tree or its branches. These symbols can be drawn, cut out, found, or purchased. They represent ancestors of Jesus either in faith or bloodline, such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Moses, Jesse, David, Solomon, Joseph and Mary, etc., found in the Bible.

D. THE SYMBOL OF THE ADVENT OR CHRISTMAS HOUSE

A popular variation of the Jesse tree is the Advent or Christmas house usually purchased from a religious goods store. One of many windows is opened each day to display still another feature of the coming of Jesus. On December 24 the door is opened revealing the Nativity scene.

E. A SPECIAL ADVENT CALENDAR

A special Advent Calendar would be drawn to denote the special events that could be accomplished during this season of Advent. The four weeks before Christmas can be designed into a special Advent calendar of personal preparation. As the season demands conversion, hope and charity the days would be marked with goals toward personal conversion or service to be done for others.

F. THE SYMBOL OF MANGER

As an Advent tradition every Catholic family prepares a family nativity scene in other words they would call it a crib. Since Advent combines a spirit of conversion and the coming of Jesus, it is the practice of having children to prepare the manger for the family nativity scene. Each night children are invited to place in the manger one piece of straw for each good deed done that day.

G. THE ADVENT COLOUR – PURPLE

The entire season of Advent is celebrated with the purple colour. The Purple or violet symbolizes a penitential spirit that has been associated with this season. As we are waiting to celebrate the coming of Jesus Christ, we would also remember the fragile nature of us and accept the birth with penitent heart.

H. THE ADVENT PROCESSION

In many regions, various kinds of processions are held in the season of Advent. It is publicly to announce the imminent birth of the Saviour or to represent the journey to Bethlehem of Joseph and Mary and their search for a place in which Jesus would be born⁴.

IV. THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Christmas is a beautiful season of joy and happiness which is due to the birth of Jesus Christ. It is no longer just a Christian Liturgical feast but everyone immaterial of religious identity celebrates Christmas with cheer and good will. Christmas includes a number of symbols which add meaning to the celebration.

A. THE NATIVITY SCENE OR THE CRIB

The tradition of having some kind of Nativity scene also known by its French name (*crèche*), in churches and homes evolved during the Middle Ages, first in Churches as a prop for Nativity plays enacted during this season. A *crèche* is a reproduction of the cave in Bethlehem with the principal characters: Mary, Joseph, the infant Jesus in a manger, shepherds, angels and animals. It depicts the birth of Jesus. St. Francis of Assisi popularized this custom with a living Nativity scene at Greccio, Italy in 1223. These scenes constructed from every sort of material spread throughout Christendom. This is an occasion for the members of the family to come into contact with the mystery of Christmas, as they gather for a moment of prayer or to read the biblical accounts of the Lord's birth. On the eve of Christmas day the statues of the nativity scene especially the baby Jesus, are placed in the crib. All the Christian families enjoy the following this tradition as a matter of their celebration on Christmas.

B. THE CHRISTMAS TREE

Next to the Nativity scene, the most popular Christmas tradition is to have a Christmas tree in the home. Along the preparation of the Crib is always the preparation of the Christmas Tree. This custom is not the same as bringing a Yule tree or evergreens into the home originally popular during the month of the winter solstice in Germany. It was first called as Paradise tree. It preserves however rich Christian symbolism: the green of hope at a time of dying, the burning light of Christ at a time of spiritual darkness and the fruits of paradise.



Figure 1: Christmas Tree

C. THE CHRISTMAS CAROLS DURING THE SEASON OF CHRISTMAS

Carols come from the word *carolen*, meaning 'to sing joyfully', which in turn came from the Greek *choraulein*, which means 'a ring dance with flutes'. The tradition of going Christmas caroling was introduced in the American colonies by the English. This tradition symbolizes the joyful singing of the faithful about the coming of the infant Jesus⁵.

D. THE SYMBOL OF SANTA CLAUS

This visitor in bishop's robes and long white beard questioned young children about their behavior, encouraged them to prepare for the coming of the Lord at Christmas and distributed simple gifts of candy, fruit, or toys. Today this character of Santa Claus is manufactured but delightful it is. Santa Claus remained a symbol of elderly, jolly with white hair and beard, friend of the common people reminding the preparation for the coming of Jesus⁶.

V. THE SEASON OF LENT

The season of Lent precedes and prepares for Easter. It is the time to hear the Word of God, to convert, to prepare for and remember Baptism, to be reconciled with God and one's neighbor and of more frequent recourse to the "arms of Christian penance: prayer, fasting and good works." The Lent is for forty days and the beginning of the forty days is marked with the austere symbol of ashes which are used in the Liturgy of Ash Wednesday. On this day the applying of ashes on the forehead symbolizes fragility and mortality of human being and the need to be redeemed by the mercy of God.

A. THE STATIONS OF THE CROSS / VIA CRUCIS

Of all the pious exercises connected with the veneration of the Cross, none is more popular among the faithful than the way of the Cross (*Via Crucis*). Through this pious exercise the faithful movingly follow the final earthly journey of Christ: from the Mount of Olives, where the Lord, "in a small estate called Gethsemane" was taken by anguish to Calvary where he was crucified (Lk 22, 44)⁷.

B. THE PALMS

The Holy Week is the last week of the season of Lent. It begins with Palm Sunday also called as Passion Sunday. People parade with real palm or olive branches to the Church and the usual liturgy follows. The accurate historical progression of saving events is enacted in the procession with the palms. The blessed palms have always been respected as holy objects or sacramentals in the Catholic Church. These palms are burned at the local church and the ashes are used in the Ash Wednesday ritual.



Figure 2: The Palm

C. WASHING OF THE FEET DURING THE HOLY THURSDAY RITUAL

This ritual imitates Jesus' Last Supper action of humility and service by washing the feet of the twelve apostles. In the same manner the twelve participants are chosen from the parish at large as a symbol of twelve apostles and the priest washes their feet, wipes and kisses it during the Holy Thursday rituals. The washing their feet symbolizes the theme of humility and service.

D. THE VENERATION OF THE CRUCIFIED CHRIST

The journey of Lent ends with the Easter *Triduum* (Three days: Holy Thursday, Good Friday, Holy Saturday), initiated by the celebration of the *Coena Domini* Mass. During the *Triduum*, Good Friday which is dedicated to the celebration of the Lord's Passion, is eminently suited for the "Adoration of the Holy Cross." The slow procession of people to kiss a cross held by ministers remains a dramatic feature of Passion of Christ. The Holy Cross symbolizes the crucified Saviour and the great suffering which He suffered for the salvation of humankind.

VI. THE SEASON OF EASTER

A. THE EATER FIRE

During the Easter celebration the new light is lit to symbolize the new life. On the night of the vigil celebration, all the lights of the Church are switched off and at the entrance of the Church the faithful gather together to lit the new light. This liturgy brings forth the truth that Christ is the light of the World and from this light the world is going to be saved. From the new fire the Easter candle is lit and the Lighting of the Easter candle denotes the dispelling of darkness.

B. THE EASTER LAMB

In the Old Testament the sacrificed lamb was the key symbol of the Passover Seder. In New Testament it continued to be a symbol of Jesus, the Lamb of God, slain and raised from the dead to gain freedom for all from the slavery of sin and spiritual ignorance.

C. THE EASTER EGG

The egg has become a popular Easter symbol. The Creation myths of many ancient peoples center in a cosmogenic egg from which the universe is born. The egg, therefore, is a natural symbol, not only of creation, but also of re-creation and resurrection. Easter eggs are given to children either in Easter baskets or hidden for the children to find. They are first boiled and then dyed with bright colours. The Easter egg is the symbol of resurrection.

D. THE EASTER LILIES

The Easter Lilies bloom during Easter time. In early Christian Art the lily is a symbol of purity because of its delicacy of form and its whiteness. For the same reason it serves as a symbol of resurrection in the Easter celebrations⁸.

VII. THE SYMBOLS OF THE SACRAMENTS AND THE SACRAMENTALS

A. THE SACRAMENTAL SYMBOLS

The word Sacrament comes from the Latin word "*Sacramentum*" means 'sign' or 'symbol' that effects or causes grace. According to Karl Rahner, "Christ in his historical existence is both reality and sign, *sacraentum* and *res sacramenti*, of the redemptive grace of God, which through him no longer, as it did before his coming, rules high over the world as the as yet hidden will of the remote, transcendent God, but in him is given and established in the world, and manifested there."

B. THE SYMBOLS IN THE SACRAMENT OF BAPTISM

In Baptism, there are important sacramentals present: recitation of promises by those present, marking of the infant with the sign of the cross, pouring of water or immersion, anointing with the holy Chrism, clothing with a white garment, giving of a lighted candle, and touching of the ears and mouth. The water is a very important symbol of new life of an individual into Christianity. The recitation of promises by the parents symbolizes their responsibility towards the upbringing of the children into Christian faith. Marking of the infant with the sign of the cross symbolizes the warm welcome that is extended to the child into the new faith. Clothing with white garment symbolizes purity for the sins of the individual are forgiven. The lighted candle resembles Christ who is the light of the world and the ears and mouth is touched so that the person hears the word of God and proclaims it and hence become the evangelizer of Christian faith.

C. THE SACRAMENT OF CONFIRMATION

The young people who are baptized are given the sacrament of confirmation. The sacrament of Confirmation is given to the young people to strengthen them in faith. The sacramentals found in this sacrament are: the special anointing

on the forehead in the form of a cross by which the persons' baptism is sealed, and a slap on the cheek is a sign of welcome and strength to face a spiritual battle in this world.

D. THE SACRAMENT OF EUCHARIST

The two major symbols used in the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and the cup of wine. It has been the faith of the Catholics from the earliest times that Jesus is present during this Eucharistic ritual. Those who share the bread and cup with each other become one with Christ and one with each other because it is one Christ whom they share.

E. THE SACRAMENT OF RECONCILIATION

In the sacrament of reconciliation, the priest is the symbol of the presence of Christ himself, as a symbol of contrition the person confesses his or her sins, and the priest absolves the sins of that person and gives the penitent the penance. Penance is usually some prayers or acts that taken to claim full responsibility of the wrong doing⁹.

F. THE SACRAMENT OF MARRIAGE

Marriage is the sacrament of relationship with God. The marriage contract is called as covenant, a deep commitment of the two people to each other. It symbolizes the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Christian marriage is also self- giving. Importantly and from a Christian point of view this self- giving with all the suffering and pain that can entail, does lead to resurrection.

G. THE SACRAMENT OF THE ANOINTING OF THE SICK

The anointing of the sick person with the oil is an ancient practice. The sacrament of anointing of the sick is accompanied by communion and if desired confession. Only the forehead and the hands are anointed in this sacrament. The oil used in this ritual is a symbol of health and nourishment. Hence those who are sick, old, at the death bed can receive this sacrament.

H. THE SACRAMENT OF HOLY ORDERS

Ordination is the ritual of service and ministry. By ordination one gets the power to proclaim the Word of God, shepherd and serve the people through his ministry.

I. THE SYMBOLS FOUND IN THE SACRAMENTALS OF THE CHURCH

It is very easy to identify the Catholics with the usage of sacramentals. Christians always wore medals and scapulars, sprinkle holy water or burn a piece of palm when bad weather threatened, fingered the rosary beads, prayed from prayer books and leaflets, genuflected when entering church, kneel and make the sign of the cross, attended Mass on Sundays and novena services, visited grottoes and shrines, etc. The

Catholics believed that by the usage of sacramentals they were in contact with the divine presence and power.



Figure 3: Church

VIII. THE SYMBOLIC GESTURES AND ACTIONS

The joy of celebrating our faith happens in a multiplicity of gestural and bodily languages. In the signs and symbols the sacramental presence of Christ is present. Every exterior element of liturgical action has a rapport with an internal vitality that works in the heart of every believer so that he may grow in faith.

A. THE SYMBOL OF SIGN OF THE CROSS

The liturgical celebration always begins with the sign of the cross which is felt through the entire body, symbolizes the sacramental presence of Christ in all celebrations. The sign of the cross also opens the horizon of our heart to the greatness of Trinitarian love and thus illuminates our heart.

B. THE SYMBOL OF STANDING TOGETHER

Standing was a natural expression of respect, reverence and readiness. Standing symbolizes the readiness to accomplish that which the Spirit tells the Church, to be able to participate in the paschal victory of the teacher in the eternal Jerusalem¹⁰

C. KNEELING, PROSTRATION, GENUFLECTING, BOWING

Kneeling has been a popular devotional position only during Modern times. Kneeling is a sign of penance, supplication and adoration. Another prayer position is prostration. It symbolizes an intense, total, and dramatic expression of adoration, penance or supplication. A gesture peculiar to Catholics is that of genuflecting before entering a Church. This is a symbol of adoration and greeting directed toward the divine presence of the Blessed Sacrament reserved in the Tabernacle in the sanctuary. A slight bow is made when the name of Jesus occurred in prayer and a more profound bow always substituted for a genuflection. These are symbolic of one's smallness or humility in the presence of the greatness of the Lord.

D. RAISING THE EYES AND HANDS, LAYING ON OF HANDS

The raising of the eyes and hands to the heavens is another prayer gesture, which recalled a picture of God being present in a heaven above creatures. So when one raising his or her eyes or hands upward it symbolizes receiving or giving. The Laying on of hands signifies a giving of special authority and blessing. This gesture is used during the Sacrament of Holy Orders by the minister is given the power and authority of the Church.

E. STRIKING THE BREAST

The striking of the breast is a devotional gesture of the sorrow for sin, the root of which was thought to be in the heart. Hence the striking of the breast explain the sorrowfulness of the one who does it in the liturgy of the Mass¹¹.

F. THE SYMBOL OF PROCESSION DURING THE LITURGY

The procession is a liturgical gesture which symbolizes our continuous walk toward pastures of kingdom. In this gesture we proclaim that we have here no fixed home that we do not depend on any stability since we know that life in all its meanings moves ever forward.

G. SINGING

Singing is the symbol of joy which is in our hearts expressed. It happens not only when we are happy but also when we are sad too. Singing is the voice of joy and hope¹².

IX. CONCLUSION

The richness of liturgy is its symbols, signs, gestures and actions. Through these signs and symbols, God places us in an

ineffable relationship of love so that by means of the small and simple gestural actions of our lives we may develop the greatness of God's love offered to us in the great event of the sacramental celebration. In the symbols and signs of the liturgy the Invisible gives His presence and helps us move toward eternity. These liturgical symbols as they help the Christian community to live in communion with the divine, it also helps to live in communion with each other. Our regular and prayerful participation in the liturgy helps us address our concerns and give thanks to God. To live the signs of the liturgy means to incarnate our own faith, rich with prayer, in these gestures and actions and to rejoice in the certainty of the Father's presence and the paschal mystery of Christ.

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