Symbols: More than Meets the Eye

On walking into a Catholic church for the first time, many people are struck by how visually appealing it is. Their eyes are drawn to the stained glass windows, candles, holy water fonts, sculptures and statuary, Stations of the Cross, crucifix, tabernacle, altar, and lectern. One gets the sense that something is being said even though no words are spoken. Long before the printed words, the faith was taught through these “bibles in stone.” Such is the power of symbols.

Unlike signs, which point to things in a rather straightforward fashion, symbols represent things more profound than they themselves are. Unfortunately, many Catholics do not know or are unaware of the Church’s vast treasury of symbols. In the pages that follow the reader will be introduced to and given the opportunity to explore some of these symbols and the powerful realities they communicate to us.

One important reality is the Catholic principle of sacramentality—that the divine, the unnamed and unknowable mystery, is made visible and real to us in and through the
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material. Bread, wine, water, physical gestures, art, and the like, can and do lead to the sacred. Or, in other words, there is more here than meets the eye. Indeed, symbols appeal to all our senses—sight, sound, taste, touch, and smell.

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* conveys the insight that “In human life, signs and symbols occupy an important place. As a being at once body and spirit, man expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols. As a social being, man needs signs and symbols to communicate with others, through language, gestures, and actions. The same holds true for his relationship with God” (#1146).

This is a very incarnational way of thinking and living. God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. God also reveals God’s self to us in the multiple symbols connected with our faith tradition. In fact, it could be said that symbols are the very language of faith. This book is but one humble attempt at expanding and appreciating our faith tradition.

As you’ll discover reading the book, good symbols have a way of “repeating” themselves. On more than one occasion in the book, I’ll return to the classic Christian symbols of Jesus, Spirit, Eucharist, Scripture, Fire, Water, and Community/Assembly. Each time, however, I’ll be looking at the symbol in a related, but different way. I believe this is what all the great symbols open themselves up to—multiple meanings. As with life, when you change the perspective, new insights emerge. It is true with the symbols of faith as well.

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