

# The Sacraments of Sensibility

**C**atholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the Holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.

The assertions in the last paragraph are not statements of what Catholics should be like, nor are they demands that Catholics return to earlier modes of religious sensibility. They are, as I hope to show in this extended essay, factual descriptions of Catholics, both practicing and supposedly lapsed, and the Catholic religious imagination that shapes their lives.

This special Catholic imagination can appropriately be called sacramental. It sees created reality as a “sacrament,” that is, a revelation of the presence of God. The workings of this imagination are most obvious in the Church’s seven sacraments, but the seven are both a result and a reinforcement of a much

broader Catholic view of reality. And Reality. Andre Dubus, who has an acute awareness of sacramentality, describes this perspective in his book *Meditations from a Moving Chair*: “A sacrament is physical and within it is God’s love; as a sandwich is physical, and nutritious, and pleasurable, and within it is love, if someone makes it for you and gives it to you with love; even harried or tired or impatient love, but with love’s direction and concern, love’s again and again wavering and distorted focus on goodness, then God’s love too is in the sandwich.”

The sandwich becomes enchanted because it is permeated by, dense in, awash with the two loves—human and divine.

How can a large group of people accept an enchanted cosmos when in fact Creation has been demystified and demythologized? Does not disenchantment rule the modern world? Or could it be that the enchanted Catholic imagination is indeed a manifestation of post-modernity?

I don’t believe in either modernity or post-modernity. I find no persuasive evidence that either modern or post-modern humankind exists outside of faculty office buildings. Everyone tends to be pre-modern.<sup>1</sup> There may well be a theoretical opposition between enchantment and science, though such scientific phenomena as black holes, dark space, the nonlocality of particles, big bang inflation, and the great attractor suggest that science may have an enchantment of its own. For the purposes of this book, I intend to concentrate on Catholic manifestations of the enchanted imagination because I find ample evidence that most humans (other than philosophers and theologians) see little inconsistency between science and religion in their ordinary lives.

Is this special Catholic sensibility gradually declining in the face of long-term trends of demystification and secularization? Certainly, in the years since the Second Vatican Council, some Catholic ideologues have tried to demystify the Catholic heritage in order to make it more palatable to moderns. They have not been successful, however, as I will try to show in the chapter on Mary, the mother of Jesus. I am not persuaded that there is any evidence that shows a decline in mystery. Indeed, it appears that belief in life after death has increased by 20 percent when U.S. Catholics born in the early decades of this century are compared to U.S. Catholics born since 1940.

I realize that these assumptions go against the existing conventional wisdom. I take issue with that supposed wisdom in my book *Religion as Poetry*. I will not pause here to address it again.

In this extended essay I will ask whether one can derive from works of high culture (ecclesiastical architecture, opera, painting) permeated by Catholic sensibility hypotheses which predict the way ordinary Catholics behave and then test these hypotheses against empirical data. Does the sensibility displayed by Catholic high art also reveal itself in the attitudes and behavior of ordinary Catholics? If Catholic high culture is enchanted, can one find the same enchantment in the lives of the Catholic laity? In a further attempt to demonstrate the power of the Catholic imagination, even for Catholics who may have officially left the Church—what we might call “cultural Catholics”—I will explore whether the sensibility expressed in Catholic high culture continues to influence Catholic popular culture and artists who are not known for their explicit piety.

I endorse Alfred North Whitehead's comment in the epigraph, but I do not wish thereby to reject dogma even if it is the superstructure of religion. Religion begins in the imagination and in stories, but it cannot remain there. The stories which are our first contact with religion ("A decree went out from Caesar that the whole world should be enrolled . . ." "Early on the morning the first day of the week . . ." "And Jesus took bread and blessed it . . .") are subject to rational and critical examination as we grow older to discover both what they mean and whether we are still able to believe them. Bethlehem becomes the Incarnation. The empty tomb becomes the Resurrection. The final supper becomes the Eucharist. These are all necessary and praiseworthy developments. Nonetheless, the origins and raw power of religion are at the imaginative (that is, experiential and narrative) level both for the individual and for the tradition.<sup>2</sup> The doctrine of the Incarnation has less appeal to the whole self than does the picture of the Madonna and Child in a cave. The doctrine of the Resurrection has less appeal to the total human personality than do the excited women and the awestruck disciples on the road to Emmaus that first day of the week. The doctrine of the Real Presence is less powerful than the image of the final meal in the upper room. None of the doctrines is less true than the stories. Indeed, they have the merit of being more precise, more carefully thought out, more ready for defense and explanation. But they are not where religion or religious faith starts, nor in truth where it ends.

Catholicism shares these stories with the other Christian churches. However, Catholicism invests the stories with its distinctive sensibility, developing Easter lilies and Santa Claus and the Feast of Corpus Christi.

Catholic devotions include, as I have said, Mary the mother of Jesus, angels and saints, souls in purgatory, statues, stained-glass windows, holy water, religious medals, candles. Most other Christian denominations do not engage in such devotions. Indeed, they dismiss them as superstition and perhaps idolatry. It is not my intention to defend Catholic devotional practices but rather to show that they illustrate how the Catholic religious imagination differs from the Protestant religious imagination. Since I will rely in this book on empirical data collected in the North Atlantic world, I will not attempt comparisons with other religious heritages—Islamic, Jewish, and Orthodox, for example. My aim is to specify how the Catholic imaginative tradition differs from other versions of the Western Christian story.

The fundamental insight which guides this exploration comes from the work of David Tracy, especially his *Analogical Imagination*.<sup>3</sup> Tracy noted that the classic works of Catholic theologians and artists tend to emphasize the presence of God in the world, while the classic works of Protestant theologians tend to emphasize the absence of God from the world. The Catholic writers stress the nearness of God to His creation, the Protestant writers the distance between God and His creation; the Protestants emphasize the risk of superstition and idolatry, the Catholics the dangers of a creation in which God is only marginally present. Or, to put the matter in different terms, Catholics tend to accentuate the immanence of God, Protestants the transcendence of God. Tracy is consistently careful to insist that neither propensity is superior to the other, that both need each other, and, in my sociological terminology, the correlation between the two imaginations and their respective religious traditions is low level. Nonetheless, they *are* different one from another.

Much of my sociological work in the last decade and a half has been an attempt to see whether Tracy's theory can generate sociological hypotheses which can be tested against data about the behavior and attitudes of the Catholic population. So far it has not been necessary to accept the null hypothesis that there is no distinctively Catholic religious sensibility. In fact, quite the contrary.

Cognitive psychologists have recently begun to insist that metaphors—statements that one reality is like another reality—are the fundamental tools of human knowledge. We understand better and explain more adequately one reality to ourselves by comparing it to another reality which we already know. Thus, poor bemused and doomed Romeo, struggling to give meaning to his love for Juliet, tells himself and us that she is like the sun. He is asserting that she brings light and warmth and cheer to his life, just as the sun does. She is not a ball of exploding gas, of course. She is both like and unlike the sun. Marvin Turner suggests that the parable, a narrative form of the metaphor in which humans project a known story onto a hitherto unknown story so that they can better understand the latter, is a way of knowing what may actually have preceded language in the evolutionary process of *Homo sapiens*.<sup>4</sup>

The Catholic imagination in all its many manifestations (Tracy calls it "analogical") tends to emphasize the metaphorical nature of creation. The objects, events, and persons of ordinary existence hint at the nature of God and indeed make God in some fashion present to us. God is sufficiently like creation that creation not only tells us something about God but, by so doing, also makes God present among us. Everything in creation, from the exploding cosmos to the whirling, dancing, and utterly mysterious quantum particles, discloses something about God and,

in so doing, brings God among us. The love of God for us, in perhaps the boldest of all metaphors (and one with which the Church has been perennially uneasy), is like the passionate love between man and woman. God lurks in aroused human love and reveals Himself to us (the two humans first of all) through it. Eventually, the Church came to see that human love was indeed a sacrament (a metaphor *par excellence*) which discloses God's grace and makes it present among us.

I use the word "lurk" advisedly. The Catholic imagination at its best senses that God is, to use Richard Wilber's phrase, the "Cheshire smile which sets us fearfully free." Like the beloved in the Song of Songs, God leaves all kinds of hints of Her presence, but slips away just at the moment we think we might have caught a glimpse of Her. At the same time, like the lover in the Song of Songs, God flits around the garden and peers in the latticework, hoping to catch sight of His beloved in all her naked beauty.

While I'm at it, allow me to make another semantic disclaimer. In this essay I use the words "analogy" and "metaphor" interchangeably. In fact there is a distinction which is philosophically important if not immediately germane to my purposes. When one says that God is love, meaning like human love only more powerful and passionate, one is using a metaphor. When one goes a step further and says that human love is an analogy for God, one says that there is a reality in God which human love is like and in which in some fashion human love participates. Can there be metaphorical discourse about God which is not analogical? I am inclined to think that there cannot, but this is not the place to argue the subject.

In the Protestant heritage, there is considerable reluctance to go so far as to equate human love with divine. Marriage, while

good and holy, has never become a sacrament. If one says in this tradition that human sexual union is like the union between God and Her people, there is an immediate need to insist that God's passion is also very different from human passion. Thus, the Protestant imagination (Tracy calls it "dialectical") stresses the "unlike" dimension of a metaphor and is in fact uneasy with the idea of metaphor.

The Reformers, rightly upset about the prevalence of superstition among the peasant peoples of Europe, thought that the analogical imagination brought God too close to the world and was responsible for superstition. Indeed, the dialectical imagination, latent in the Catholic heritage all along, emerged powerfully with the Reformers precisely because it had not been taken seriously enough by Catholic leadership (though what the Church could have done about the peasant superstition in Europe is another question). Tracy quite properly insists that the dialectical imagination is a necessary corrective to the analogical imagination.

However, if analogy is rejected, it is hard to find any philosophical justification for a metaphor about God. If human love, for example, does not in any way participate in God's love and vice versa, what justification is there for the comparison between the two? Are not the loves totally different realities and the metaphor which says one is like the other nothing more than wordplay?

The distinguished Protestant theologian Paul Tillich, displeased by the anthropomorphic language predicated of God, tried to sweep it away by talking about a God beyond God, about whom nothing at all could be said or known except negatively.



All God talk then is not only metaphorical but also idolatrous. We must live out our lives knowing that there is God but knowing nothing about God.

These philosophical and theological differences are the bases (or perhaps only the justifications and rationalizations) for the two different ways of approaching the divine reality that arose out of the Reformation. Put more simply, the Catholic imagination loves metaphors; Catholicism is a verdant rainforest of metaphors. The Protestant imagination distrusts metaphors; it tends to be a desert of metaphors. Catholicism stresses the “like” of any comparison (human passion is like divine passion), while Protestantism, when it is willing to use metaphors (and it must if it is to talk about God at all), stresses the unlike.

In my courses at the University of Chicago and the University of Arizona, students resist strongly the notion that human passion discloses God’s passion. Human sexual love, they tell me, is lewd or lustful, while God’s love is pure. Catholics are as likely to make this argument as are students from other denominations. The propensity to protect God from profanation, at the heart of the dialectical imagination, is very strong even among Catholics because official Catholicism has yet to make up its mind whether it really believes that sexual passion is not in itself lewd or lustful.

A metaphor is a two-way street. (The words “metaphor,” “sacrament,” “mystery,” and “symbol” can be used interchangeably in this context, though in other contexts nuances and refinements might be necessary.) Romeo knows more about Juliet because he has been able to compare her to the sun, but in the act of making that comparison he also takes notice of the sun in a way which he

had not before. Had he lived longer, he would often have pictured not only his lover as sunlight but also the sunlight as possessing some of the qualities of Juliet.

Similarly, in the sacramental comparison of human love with divine love, the passionate man and woman understand God better as they grasp that God loves like they do, only more so. But the participation of both loves in one another through the metaphor also enlightens the man and woman about their own love and the need especially for forgiveness and mercy in that love. The Catholic religious sensibility is often almost overwhelmed by the thickness of the metaphors in its dense forest of imagery and story. God and grace lurk everywhere. In the dictum “grace is everywhere” the emphasis can be placed on any of the three words. I suspect that for the creative artist possessed by the Catholic imagination, the emphasis is on the third.

Where did this forest come from?

Of all the world religions which emerged in the last half of the millennium before the Common Era and the first half of the first millennium of the Common Era, Catholicism is the most at ease with creation. It has never been afraid (at least not in principle) of “contaminating” the purity of spirit with sensible and often sensual imagery. On the face of it, this compromise with nature religion is strange. All the other world religions and quasi religions (like Platonism) have abhorred the practices and images of nature religion as defilement of spirit. Catholicism, in its better moments, feels instinctively that nature does not defile spirit but reveals it.<sup>5</sup> Hence Catholicism (again, in its better moments) has not hesitated to make its own the practices, customs, and devotions of the nature religions wherever it has encountered them—never more systematically, thoroughly, or creatively than in Ireland.

Whence comes this confidence?

Perhaps it arose from the explosive joy of the early Church over its experience of the risen Jesus. In any case, it certainly existed at the time of Pope Gregory's famous message to Augustine of Canterbury. The latter worried about the pagan customs of the Angles. Might they be put to Christian use? Gregory replied

When Almighty God has brought you to our most reverend brother Bishop Augustine, tell him what I have decided after long deliberation about the English people, namely that the idol temples of that race should by no means be destroyed, but only the idols in them. Take holy water and sprinkle it in these shrines, build altars and place relics in them. For if the shrines are well built, it is essential that they should be changed from the worship of devils to the service of the true God. When this people see that their shrines are not destroyed they will be able to banish error from their hearts and be more ready to come to the places they are familiar with, but now recognizing and worshipping the true God. And because they are in the habit of slaughtering much cattle as sacrifices to devils, some solemnity ought to be given to them in exchange for this. So on the day of the dedication of the holy martyrs, whose relics are deposited there, let them make themselves huts from the branches of trees around the churches which have been converted out of shrines, and let them celebrate the solemnity with religious feasts. Do not let them sacrifice animals to the devil, but let them slaughter animals for their own food to the praise of God, and let them give thanks to the Giver of all things for His bountiful provision. Thus while some outward rejoicings are preserved, they will be able more easily to share in inward rejoicings. It is doubtless impossible to cut out everything at once from their

stubborn minds just as the man who is attempting to climb to the highest place rises by steps and degrees and not by leaps.<sup>6</sup>

The message does not say it, but the missionaries to the Angles and the Saxons (and the Jutes, whom no one ever mentions) followed Gregory's model even to the extent of using the name of their spring festival for the Christian Passover festival. "Easter" comes from "Eastre," which was the feast of Eastren, the Anglo-Saxon goddess of the dawn (that is, the East) and of spring and new life (the cognate of Venus, Aphrodite, and Brigid). Three symbols which represented her fertility were lilies, rabbits, and eggs. It took a lot of religious courage to risk such adulteration of religion.

The early Irish Christians took matters one step further by clinging to a belief in reincarnation from their pagan past: some of them decided that Brigid was the mother of Jesus reincarnate and had actually nursed Him. Hence, when they said Brigid was the "Mary of the Gael" they meant the phrase literally, as far as it is wise to take anything an Irish person says literally.

It is hard to imagine Jewish or Islamic or Platonist or Hindu or Buddhist or Parsi missionaries (should there have been any in these world religions) taking such liberties with their heritage.

It can be argued that early Western Christianity during its first twelve hundred years had no option in the matter. In the chaos which enveloped Western Europe during the time of the invasions and the gradual collapse of the Roman civil order, the Church lacked the resources to do anything more than spread a veneer of Christianity over the resident pagan cultures save in the royal courts, the monasteries, and eventually the universities (from which sources come the little we know about the

early Middle Ages). People were baptized, married, and buried in Catholic rites administered by often semiliterate, and usually married, clergy who frequently had no idea what the words or the ceremonies meant. To expropriate as much paganism as one could was merely to make a virtue of necessity. Still, Catholic Christianity did not hesitate in carrying out this perhaps foolhardy strategy. In one sense, the Reformation was a protest of a segment of the clerical elite and the newly emerging middle class against the continuation of paganism at a time when the Dark Ages had been definitely left behind.

Historian Stephen Ozment, no foe to Protestantism, remarks of the Reformation and the Counter Reformation that they were a “conservative campaign on the part of elite Christian clergy to subdue a surrounding native culture that had always been and preferred to remain semi-pagan . . . an attempt to impose on uneducated and reluctant men and women a Christian way of life utterly foreign to their own experiences and very much against their own desires.” Having undercut traditional Catholic ritual and practice, he adds, the Reformation unloosed far worse superstitions, especially concerning witchcraft, that were among the horrors of European preliterate culture.

Perhaps the compromise with nature religion in which Catholicism engaged was for reasons of both theory and practical necessity. Yet there is nothing in the attitude of Pope Gregory that reveals any hint that baptizing the metaphors of paganism was merely a pragmatic decision. Grace was everywhere even then.

If the rainforest of metaphors, which Catholicism not only made its peace with but also patently celebrated, provided it with an enormous wealth of resources (and, I will argue, is why

Catholics remain Catholic), it also created problems from which Catholicism has never been freed—superstition, folk religion, idolatry. What, for example, about Our Lady of Guadalupe? Some Catholic historians will argue that devotion to her is a form of folk religion which has crossed the admittedly broad and permeable boundary between Catholicism and paganism. The original shrine in Spain (an image on a rock) was a baptized pagan sanctuary. While the Mexican devotion to this Lady wears a patina of Catholicism, the customs and beliefs associated with it are mostly superstitious. Indeed, the woman does not even hold the Babe in her arms; she is not even a Madonna.

Yet does she not assure the masses of Mexico that God loves them like a mother as well as like a father, that she is on their side when they resist poverty and oppression? Will not Mexican Americans tell you that she is not carrying the Babe because she is pregnant with Him and will soon bring Him to life even as she brings life to us? Is she not then an appropriate popular exercise of the Catholic religious sensibility?

One cannot say the same thing about the feast of the Bomfim in Brazil—the festival of Our Lord of the Happy Death, celebrated the first week of January in Salvador da Bahia on a day also designated locally as the feast of St. Jerome. One searches the first days of the universal Church calendar for either festival without success; indeed, one searches the madcap celebration (perhaps in defiance of death) for signs of Christianity. Clad in the white turbans and dresses seen in voodoo ceremonies, a band of black women, out of respect, sweeps the steps of the Catholic church in the center of town where the procession begins and

the steps of another overlooking the Atlantic where it ends, also out of respect. In between, the festival consists of heavy beer drinking, loud musical rhythms, extroverted dancing, and the most blatant (if usually inoffensive) sexual innuendo that this Nordeamericano has ever seen. A harmless festival perhaps, a delightful festival, but hardly Christian.

After returning to the United States, I described this phenomenon in a lecture at Old St. Patrick's Church in Chicago. An elderly man with snow-white hair, a red face, and the gray suit and brown sweater which are required for an Irish countryman at a lecture, said to me in a rich Galway brogue, "Ah, now, Father, aren't you being too hard on your Brazilians? Sure weren't the Irish that way for the first thousand years and aren't some of us that way even now?"

Thus spoke the analogical imagination. Thus, too, spoke a loyal (if perhaps not altogether explicit) disciple of Gregory the Great who was willing to grant a people the right to grow into Catholicism step by step instead of by leaps, even if the steps took a thousand years!

However, those who are possessed by the Catholic sensibility should realize the direction in which its risks lie.

Besides, the sexual innuendo in my Brazilian experience has never been quite that explicit in Ireland. Not in contemporary Ireland, anyway.

More's the pity?

Maybe.

Lest my intent be misunderstood, it may be useful to specify precisely what the book is *not* about.

1. I am not attempting a detailed and comprehensive statement of Catholic doctrine. Doctrine is the cognitive superstructure of a religious heritage and is essential. My goal, however, is to describe the imaginative and narrative infrastructure of the Catholic heritage, the experiences, images, rituals, and stories which are at the center of Catholicism and which influence Catholic behavior beyond the walls of the Church.

2. Nor will I strive to present the essential truths of Catholic belief, a worthy activity but one beyond the scope of this book. I am not trying to enhance the propositional faith of Catholics; my effort is to explain to Catholics and others how these experiences, images, rituals, and stories so tenaciously cling to Catholics and bind most of them to their heritage regardless of how far away from the Church they may move.

3. I have no intention of defending policies of the institutional Church. Thus, when I write about erotic desire, I must not be understood as endorsing (or disapproving of) the present policy of Catholic institutional leadership on contraception. Nor in my discussion of Mary the mother of Jesus as a metaphor for (or sacrament of) the Mother Love of God (that is, the immense fertility of God's passionate love for us) will I be defending the abuse of the Mary metaphor when it is converted into a negative sexual stereotype.<sup>7</sup>

4. I will not assert that the Catholic imaginative tradition—the way Catholics picture the world and God's relationship to it—is better than other ways which might be available but merely that it is different. Nor will I suggest that it is without potential weaknesses and flaws, especially its propensity for folk religion, superstition, and magic. Instead, I will suggest that it chooses to emphasize the presence of God in the world and runs