

# Seeing the World through the Lens of the Paschal Mystery

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At the small, Catholic, liberal arts college where I teach, my favorite class is a junior-level course called Sacraments, Justice, and the Moral Life. Taught in the spring semester, this course seeks to enlighten students on the connection between the Catholic sacramental system and daily living. I impress upon them that sacraments are not so much about grace *received* as they are about grace-filled relationships *lived*. I labor hard to overturn the predominant assumption that Christian worship is an escape from the world, a time-out from the regular routine, the stress, and the humdrum of everyday life. Plain and simple, sacraments help to reframe our lives according to the Paschal Mystery of Christ; in our rites we die to self in order that our unity in Christ may grow ever stronger.

One of the pedagogical ways I attempt to engrain this understanding of sacraments within my students (many of whom may not be Catholic or have been poorly catechized) is by tending a small vineyard planted several years ago by members of the same course.<sup>1</sup> On the college's acre-and-a-half farm, started in 2010 as a project designed to assist those in the area who could not afford to buy quality vegetables, we planted twenty grape vines with the hopes of producing wine that would, in turn, be offered at Mass on campus.<sup>2</sup> Through the work of pruning the vines, tending them throughout the summer, harvesting the grapes, crushing them to yield juice, and carefully fermenting the juice with sugar and yeast, students discover the strenuous labor and patient waiting that go into placing "the fruit of the vine" on the altar table each Sunday. Students simultaneously gain a newfound respect for the intimate connection between the land we cultivate and the worship we generate.

In truth, sacraments begin long before oil anoints the hands of the sick or water immerses the newly baptized into the life of Christ. Sacraments originate in the messy business of everyday life, for it is here that we are called to practice the art of Christian sacrifice. We look out into the world and see the many ways that life leads to a letting go that produces new life. As John's Gospel poetically states: "Unless a grain of wheat falls to the earth and dies, it remains only a single grain, but if it dies, it yields a rich harvest" (John 12:24). If we are living into the liturgy we celebrate, then we are in a constant process of learning



Photo by Stephen S. Wilbricht

Tending a vineyard on campus helps students connect the land that is cultivated with the liturgy that is celebrated.

to let go of the self in little, seemingly insignificant ways in order that life and love, mercy and compassion can flourish around us. Hopefully, students come to the end of the semester, having studied the seven sacraments of the Catholic Church, with a well-rounded sense of sacramentality, one that begins with the messiness of material creation and the fabric of our blessed lives and proceeds to the contemplations of the Paschal Mystery—death to self in order to live for others.

## DEFINING SACRAMENTALITY

Sacramentality is a word rarely uttered in daily speech. Yet sacramentality is very much at the foundation of Christian living. In the recent revision of his seminal work, *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology*, Kevin Irwin devotes a new chapter to the topic of sacramentality. Irwin's definition is as follows: "a principle that is based in part on the goodness of creation, the value of human labor and productivity, and the engagement of humans in the act of worship. . . . It is a worldview that invites us to be immersed more and more fully in the here and now, on this good earth, and not to shun any of our fellow creatures of and on this good earth."<sup>3</sup> While Catholics tend to link sacramentality solely to the celebration of the seven sacraments of the Church, the term suggests a much larger framework.

Sacramentality is grounded in the Genesis story in which God creates the world and calls it “good.” Thus, every aspect of creation, every breathing creature as well as every inanimate object, bears the mark of God’s grace. The material aspects of the entire cosmos are meant to reveal the abundance of God’s love. Pope Francis suggests just this in his encyclical *On Care for Our Common Home (Laudato Si’)*: “The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colors are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise.”<sup>4</sup>

It should come as no surprise that a God who chose to become one with the messiness of creation through the Incarnation should want to continue to maintain an ongoing relationship that joins the human to the divine through the material of this “good” universe. Irwin is fond of speaking of the Church’s use of “daily and domestic things” to elevate our awareness of God’s permeation in all aspects of life.<sup>5</sup> Take something as basic as water. One can walk into a grocery store and discover an entire aisle devoted to a plethora of brand names that bottle water. Our consumer-driven society has turned water into a fashionable commodity—a person who has a bottle of water atop his or her desk is likely to be viewed by others as health-conscious and therefore more fit. However, beneath the fancy packaging, water is water. It is a primary element of life that must be consumed for an individual to flourish and must be revered for its ability to destroy vast quantities of life, as in a flood or in a tsunami. Water is basic and essential to all of life; it is very ordinary. But water is simultaneously filled with God’s grace. Christian worship, and thus the principle of sacramentality, makes the connection between what appears to be simply ordinary and what has the potential to open our imaginations to the grandeur of God.

The concept of sacramentality enters into play precisely at the moment when we are able to recognize that water, as well as all other dimensions of material creation, are not a part of this world for our exploitation but rather for our contemplation and reverent care. When water is used in the Sacrament of Baptism, it can be seen as conveying the general sense of washing. Thus, in Baptism, Original Sin is washed away. However, it also symbolizes the death of self that allows one to be united with other Christians immersed into Christ’s Body. The waters of the font help inform us of our participation in the Paschal Mystery as well as the reality of our daily paschal living: death to self leads to new life. Water is sacred because of its significance in Baptism, but even prior to this use, water is “good” because it is wrapped up in the universe’s participation in divine life. The result of the Church’s use of this “daily and domestic thing” in the context of liturgical celebration is that there is to be no mis-



On the college farm, grape vines have been planted to produce wine to be used at Mass.

treatment of water in any dimension of a Christian’s life. Water is to be cherished and never to be abused.

## DOMESTIC SACRAMENTALITY

Too often Catholics talk about things *sacramental* in terms of actions and items that pertain to a church building. For instance, lighting candles as a sign of imploring the intercession of a particular saint is considered to be a sacramental act. Other examples of sacramentals are blessed ashes that mark the foreheads of penitent Christians on Ash Wednesday, blessed palm branches that signal the Lord’s entry into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, and blessed food baskets that are brought to and from worship on Thanksgiving Day. In these cases, material creation is presented before the assembly of the Church to be transformed by a prayer of blessing and returned to the faithful to celebrate and signal newness of life.

While the Church blesses many aspects of life with official blessings, thereby making them sacramental signs of God’s abundant love for us, sacramentality underscores the daily life of Christians in many ways. One example is the preparation of a family meal. This requires taking the time to plan the menu, making sure that the pantry or refrigerator is appropriately stocked, exerting the creativity and energy needed to craft the various dishes, and finally serving the food on the table. Cooking can be either a drudgery or an act of self-sacrifice whereby one gives so that others may be nourished and supported. When cooking is framed in the lens of sacrifice, when it embodies love and self-emptying, it is sacramental. God’s goodness manifests itself in the food that is consumed and in the relationships that are renewed. “Bless us, O Lord, and these thy gifts, which we are about to receive, from thy bounty, through Christ our Lord. Amen.”

Another way of discussing the principle of sacramentality is to say that liturgy is not simply something that is performed in church through recognized and official rites—it is also performed in our streets, in our offices, in our homes, in our Christian lives. When self-giving is directed toward the building up of others, the sacrificial attitudes of the cross are mysteriously present, and the pattern of Christian worship is extended into life. Simple domestic chores such as washing the dishes, mowing the lawn, waxing the car, doing the laundry, and countless other commonplace activities may be seen in terms of sacramentality, when the ingenuity of human labor is put at the service of self-gift; in these acts by which love is displayed, God’s grace has the potential to break into our midst. In ways that often go unrecognized, God is present in such simple acts of the giving of self. Kevin Irwin writes: “In the end, liturgy is primarily about what God does among us and for us. All that we do in liturgy is but a response to the over-arching, grace filled initiative of God.”<sup>6</sup> Ricky Manalo echoes this approach to liturgy as he writes, “In



Photo by Lorrie Simmons

When plants and flowers grown on the parish grounds are part of the liturgical environment, the faithful are apt to link the Creator with the work of human hands.

the liturgy of life, God is viewed as The Source from whom all Christian life and activity flows and The Cumulative Point toward which all Christian life and activity returns.”<sup>7</sup>

### SACRAMENTALITY AND THE LOCAL PARISH

There is no denying that the parish church is today more of a destination than a center for life. By this, I mean that the parish is no longer the primary locus of identity for Catholics. They may attend Mass at a particular parish, but by and large, their social circles and their closest relationships stem from other social outlets and commitments. The root cause of this decrease in connectedness, I would suggest, is directly related to the disconnect between liturgy and life. Worship gets compartmentalized rather than pervading the totality of Christian life.

Not so many years ago the liturgical calendar mandated Catholics to observe ember days and rogation days, which summoned the faithful to fast, to perform penance, and to enact public processions, all for the intention of the land’s productivity and for God’s blessing upon the changing seasons of the year.<sup>8</sup> Those days, which were designed to honor nature’s power and to implore God’s protection, were purged from the 1969 Roman calendar as society increasingly moved away from the rhythms of an agrarian culture. Nevertheless, they serve to remind us that nature is an intimate partner in the flourishing of life. Pope Benedict XVI, writing as Joseph Ratzinger, bemoans the loss of respect for the wonder of nature when he writes:



Photo by Stephen S. Wilbricht

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It is difficult for us to pray. Prayer does not fit into our theory of life and our understanding of reality. We have come to question its meaningfulness and its intrinsic validity. After all, is it not part of a magical and animistic understanding of nature that we simply can no longer share? This seems to be the case most conspicuously with those prayers that refer directly to worldly realities: the procession through the meadows in a rural parish, the blessing of the weather that implores protection from storms and asks for sunshine, rain, and fruitfulness. That seems to make sense only if one imagines that the world is guided by animated causes that dole out wind and storm, rain, and sun, and hence can be won over by talking to them, or become angry when neglected. But once the direct mechanical causal connection is recognized, we attack the problem with rational methods: with all that science has to offer so as to make life safe. And so for today’s way of thinking, prayer seems not only unproductive and ineffective, but a virtual flight from reality: it replaces world-changing action with a passive waiting on otherworldly powers.<sup>9</sup>

Reviving the spirit of ember days and rogation days, days in which, through penance and procession, we venerate the might and power of nature as well as our role to care for creation may help to reignite the Christian sacramental imagination—all of the cosmos is ripe for God’s revelation. In the words of Esther Mary Nickel, “In a culture that militates against faith, prayer, and abiding relationships, Ember Days—with the help of God’s grace—provide Christians a way of halting the flow of time, as it were, and reflecting upon what is real and unreal, what is of lasting importance and what is not, amid the various cares, occupations, and frailties of life.”<sup>10</sup> Indeed, in an age of environmental destruction and ecological disaster, our stewardship of God’s “good” creation is of “lasting importance.”

I am not necessarily proposing here the reinstatement of days of penance and prayer as a part of the official Roman calen-

dar as much as I am suggesting the need for local adaptation of the spirit of these days. There are many possibilities for the parish to reclaim both a communal and a public desire to pray for creation. Perhaps we need to be creative with the liturgical art of procession, moving through our city streets with the prayer that the ugliness of violence and the destruction of life be overturned with hearts softened by God's mercy. We need to find ways to be bold in demonstrating publicly God's desire to heal all relationships—those with God's very self, between people, and with all of creation. Prayer, penance, and procession need not be hidden behind the walls of the parish church.

Furthermore, a local parish or an entire diocese might designate a day in the spring of the year (such as Earth Day) to seriously implore God's blessing upon the budding of life as well as a day in the fall of the year designated for thanksgiving for the yield of our fields. In fact, the section "Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions," in *The Roman Missal*, contains the Mass settings "At Seedtime" and "After the Harvest."<sup>11</sup> The prayers of these Masses are rich in their wording of God's great generosity, humanity's abiding stewardship, and creation's magnificent beauty. For example, the Prayer over the Offerings in the Mass "At Seedtime" reads:

O God, who are the true Creator of the earth's produce  
and nurture carefully the fruits of the spirit,  
give success to our labors, we pray,  
so that we may gather the fruits of the earth in abundance  
and that all things,  
owing their origin to a single providence,  
may always work as one for your glory.

This prayer clearly manifests the oneness that is a part of divine design; we are incapable of gathering the fruits of creation without the Creator's "single providence." Furthermore, contemplate in one of the opening collects provided for the Mass "After the Harvest" the connection between our collaboration with creation and the work of justice:

We give you thanks, O Lord,  
for the fruits that earth has given  
to benefit the human family  
and we pray  
that, as the working of your supreme providence  
has produced them,  
so you may cause the seed of justice  
and the fruits of charity  
to spring up in our hearts.

Praying for the fruition of creation helps the Christian community to recognize the need to distribute the goods of this earth evenly and justly. Acknowledging God's hand in creation demands that our local communities engage in the messy work of alleviating hunger and poverty. As James Lies writes, "Concepts like hunger, food deserts and the relationship between poor health and poverty become a lot more real when you plant the seeds, water, weed, harvest and drive a truck load of beets, zucchini and broccoli to help fill the shelves of the



Photo © John Zich

The use of water in the Sacrament of Baptism signifies participation in the Paschal Mystery while also making apparent the physical property of cleansing.

local food pantry."<sup>12</sup> Charity naturally flows from a keen sense of sacramentality.

Beyond the designation of days throughout the calendar year for the Christian community to honor the goodness of creation, a parish might reflect on how to best use its grounds to promote viewing the world through the lens of sacramentality. Instead of paying lofty sums of money for landscaping and the grooming of spacious lawns, why not plant a garden, filled with flowers and vegetables? Imagine entering a church building on Sunday morning after walking through rows of flowers planted and tended to by parishioners of the same community. Now picture the sanctuary space adorned with floral arrangements from these gardens, or better yet with living plants that have been potted and transferred to the worship space. It would be hard to miss the connections between the primary Creator of the seed, the hours of labor dedicated to the tending of the gardens, the artistic skills of those responsible for arranging the flowers, and the ongoing witness of new life that the gardens generate day after day.

Furthermore, the Sunday celebration of the Eucharist is also the venue for a community to refine its sense of sacramentality. One need only look at the bread and wine to be offered at the altar to ponder the level of true sacrifice that has gone into the presentation of these gifts. Is the "fruit of the field" and "fruit of the vine" that has been engineered by the "work of human hands" truly a gift that we have lovingly helped to produce? Most likely, we do not feel responsible for the gifts that we are called to sacrifice; they fulfill our liturgical needs but fail to stimulate our sacramental imagination. The same could be said for the collection itself. In most of our assemblies, baskets are passed throughout pews to collect dollar bills, but does this really enact an attitude of self-sacrifice? Mark Searle writes:

Perhaps it is too much to dream of a day when we might all bring to the assembly loaves of bread and bottles of wine, and witness for ourselves the sacramental transformation of

gift which are the fruit of land we ourselves have worked and the work of our own careful hands. Perhaps we now live in too complicated a society and too remote an economy for the Sunday offertory ever again to be the occasion for a regular redistribution of wealth . . . . We are alienated in our giving, for it does not cut deeply enough into our lives to make us really aware of our mutual dependence. We are alienated from the recipients of our gifts, for not only do we rarely meet the poor and see their needs, but we often have no idea what the money is used for, or if it even reaches the poor.<sup>13</sup>

I would argue that not only are we “alienated in our giving,” but the collection, as a ritual activity, is far too neat. Such tidiness is accentuated in the ability for people to give using a direct deposit from a bank account; pastors relish the stable source of income to the parish, but such a form of giving has no liturgical significance. The collection within Mass ought to once again become a real distribution of wealth, whereby members of the assembly present clothing and food that is to be delivered to the needy. As we approach the altar with our gifts, we need to truly see a willingness to die to self so that others may live.

## CONCLUSION

Much more could be said about the ways in which we need to hone our sense of sacramentality. Indeed, the principle of sacramentality calls us to adjust our predominant outlook on life. It challenges us to examine the world and everything in it through the lens of Christ’s Paschal Mystery. God has given life in abundance so that it may be redeemed and be transformed for his glory. Just as the Lord willingly gave his life as a pure sacrifice for the world, ours is the optimistic view that this universe continues to be the locale for God’s intervention and is worth the investment of our entire selves. Christian worship ought to be ever more engaged with the things of this world that contain the potential to reveal God’s goodness. In our homes and in our churches, we have to see the ways in which self-gift offers God a platform upon which to work wonders. Refining our sense of sacramentality demands that our sacraments be messy—that oil overflows, that bread and wine are the “work of our hands,” that the sound of living water competes with our fragile voices to give praise and glory to God. Catholic sacramentality calls us to see the entire world as full of grace; our liturgical celebrations invite us to honor relationships with others and to honor creation such that we grow incapable of destroying anything that God sustains. In the end, sacramentality grounds our hope for the world yet to come, where God’s goodness will consume all things in perfect love. ♦

### Notes

1. See a more detailed methodology for this course in my essay “The Vineyard of the Lord: Teaching Sacraments as Justice,” in *AIM: Liturgical Resources* (Spring 2019): 12–15.

2. See James Lies, “Heeding Pope Francis’ Call to Connect Poverty and the Environment,” *Huffington Post*, November 29, 2016, <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/583d9495e4b0bb2962f1789c?timestamp=1480431304171>. This article contains a description of the farm’s mission and work.

3. Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology*, revised edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 125.
4. Pope Francis, *On Care of Our Common Home, Laudato Si'*, 235.
5. See Kevin W. Irwin, “A Sacramental World—Sacramentality as the Primary Language for Sacraments,” *Worship* 76, no. 3 (May 2002): 197–211.
6. Kevin W. Irwin, “A Spirited Community Encounters Christ: Liturgical and Sacramental Theology and Practice,” in *Catholic Theology Facing the Future: Historical Perspectives*, ed. Dermot A. Lane (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2003), 119–120.
7. Ricky Manalo, *The Liturgy of Life: The Interrelationship of Sunday Eucharist and Everyday Worship Practices* (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 2014), 166.
8. See Thomas J. Talley, *The Origins of the Liturgical Year* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1986). Talley describes ember days on pages 148–149 and rogation days on page 69. See also Esther Mary Nickel, “Rogation Days, Ember Days, and the New Evangelization,” *Antiphon* 16, no. 1 (2012): 21–36.
9. Joseph Ratzinger (Pope Benedict XVI), *Dogma and Preaching: Applying Christian Doctrine to Daily Life*, first unabridged edition, ed. Michael J. Miller, trans. Michael J. Miller and Matthew J. O’Connell (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 104. Quote taken from Nickel, “Rogation Days, Ember Days, and the New Evangelization,” 31.
10. Nickel, “Rogation Days, Ember Days, and the New Evangelization,” 31.
11. *The Roman Missal*, Masses and Prayers for Various Needs and Occasions, 27 and 28.
12. Lies, “Heeding Pope Francis’ Call to Connect Poverty and the Environment.”
13. Mark Searle, “Contributing to the Collection,” *Assembly* 6, no. 1 (1979): 64.

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