



Sacramentals

Liturgical Symbols That Surround Us

JOHAN VAN PARYS

Imprimi Potest: Kevin Zubel, CSsR, Provincial
Denver Province, The Redemptorists

Published by Liguori Publications, Liguori, Missouri 63057
Liguori Publications, a nonprofit corporation, is an apostolate of the Redemptorists.
To learn more about the Redemptorists, visit Redemptorists.com.
To order, visit Liguori.org or call 800-325-9521

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ISBN: 978-0-7648-2885-0
E-ISBN: 978-0-7648-7265-5

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Van Parys, Johan author

Title: Sacramentals : liturgical symbols that surround us / Johan van
Parys.

Description: First edition. | Liguori, MO : The Queen's Work, Liguori
Publications, [2025] | Includes index. | Summary: "A look at the meaning
behind the primary elements of the sacraments of the Catholic Church as
well as sacred objects, furnishings, images, and other items used in
Catholic worship and devotions"-- Provided by publisher.

Identifiers: LCCN 2025039425 (print) | LCCN 2025039426 (ebook) | ISBN
9780764828850 paperback | ISBN 9780764872655 ebook

Subjects: LCSH: Sacramentals | Sacraments--Catholic Church | Christian art
and symbolism

Classification: LCC BX2295 .V36 2025 (print) | LCC BX2295 (ebook)

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025039425>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2025039426>

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of the Catholic Church*: Modifications from the *Editio Typica* © 1997, United States Catholic Conference, Inc.—
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Roman Missal, Third Edition*.

Printed in the United States of America
29 28 27 26 25 / 8 7 6 5 4
First edition

Cover design: Wendy Barnes

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FOREWORD

TO THIS REVISED EDITION

Liguori Publications is pleased to offer *Sacramentals: Liturgical Symbols That Surround Us*. First published in 2012, this popular book helps lifelong Catholics and those preparing to enter the Church discover the fascinating meaning behind many of the objects, actions, prayers, and places that are part of our daily, liturgical, and sacramental lives.

Catholics are a sacramental people. We rely on signs and symbols, sacraments and sacramentals, to guide us on our journey of faith. Sacraments confer the grace of the Holy Spirit; sacramentals prepare us to receive it. In the sacraments, Christ shares his divine life with us, and sacramentals, through the prayer of the Church, bring us to holiness in Christ. Both sacraments and sacramentals draw their power from a single source—Christ. Through them, we are sanctified; in them, God is praised. (See *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1670.)

Johan van Parys, PhD, has expertly revised and expanded this edition to include an updated focus on the symbols and sacramentals that surround us and point us to the liturgy of the Church. (See *CCC* 1675.) May your faith life in Christ be enriched immensely by this informative and insightful presentation.

REV. THOMAS M. SANTA, CSsR
PRESIDENT / PUBLISHER LIGUORI PUBLICATIONS



FOREWORD

FROM THE FIRST EDITION

Our lives are filled with symbols and symbolic acts, from the sign of the cross made on our forehead before we were baptized to the pall placed on our coffin at the end of our lives. In addition, between these two milestones in our lives as Christians, symbols surround us.

Some symbols are obvious and easily understood, such as the crucifixes many of us have in our homes. Others are more obscure and not as common, such as the moon under Mary's feet or the eagle at the side of St. John the Evangelist. Some symbols tell the stories of the saints, while others tell the story of our faith, and still others are essential parts of the liturgy and sacramental life of the Church. The latter are notable because the liturgy uses simple elements of our daily lives and turns them into life-altering worship symbols.

Symbols are very important in our daily and liturgical lives, so it is important to make sure we are familiar with them. To that end, Johan van Parys offers an excellent introduction to some of the most significant symbols in our lives.

The aim of *Sacramentals: Liturgical Symbols That Surround Us* is twofold. The book offers insight into our daily use of symbols and the symbolic acts that uniquely equip humans for the use of symbols in a religious context, as well as how our experiences with such simple elements as water, fire, bread, and wine prepare us for their sacramental use.

Dr. van Parys then talks about our daily use of symbols and our experiences of sacramental symbols on a human level, as in the primary sacramental symbols of baptismal waters, the Easter fire, and eucharistic bread and wine, as well as secondary symbols, such as the *Gospel Book*, a crucifix, or an altar table. Throughout, he offers opportunities to reflect on the meaning of these symbols and make further connections to our experiences of them.

The religious symbols discussed here are but a few of the many that surround us, but the groundwork the book lays encourages all of us to become more aware of and appreciate symbols on a deeper level. This understanding allows their impact to be even greater each time we encounter them in our lives of faith.

GIOVANNI CARDINAL LAJOLO
PRESIDENT EMERITUS OF THE GOVERNORSHIP OF VATICAN CITY STATE

INTRODUCTION

When I was a boy, I became very enamored of my great-aunt. At a young age, she left our hometown and moved to Brussels, the capital of Belgium, where she enjoyed a successful career and celebrated life to its fullest. She was beautiful, charming and captivating. Occasionally, she would invite me to enjoy dinner in her beautiful home and join her at the opera. Those were magical evenings—memories I cherish dearly.

Shortly after the death of her husband, she said goodbye to her glamorous life in Brussels and moved back to our small hometown, where she spent the rest of her life in a retirement community. Whenever I went back to Belgium, I visited her there. I remember those visits very well, especially our last visit. By then, my auntie suffered memory loss. As I knocked somewhat hesitantly on the door to her room and walked in, she smiled and nodded to invite me in. Though she had aged quite a bit, she looked radiant as always, dressed in a dark skirt and white blouse with her signature string of pearls around her neck. She was very pleasant and welcoming but clearly did not recognize me. I sat down across from her, and she immediately started telling random family stories. It was not always clear who she was talking about until she mentioned her sister: my grandmother. I quickly interrupted her and indicated that she was talking about my grandmother. Paying no attention

to me, she continued with her stories. When she mentioned her favorite niece—my mom—I interrupted her again. Somewhat annoyed, she asked, “But who are you?” I told her I was Johan, her grandnephew. She retorted by informing me that Johan lived in the United States. “However,” she said, “he is a nice boy. Whenever he comes to Belgium, he visits me.”

When it was time to leave, I asked if I could kiss her farewell. She agreed, and when I leaned in to kiss her cheek, tears were welling up in her eyes. She looked at me and whispered, “Sweet Johan, to think I did not recognize you.”

I cried with her. By the time I left, she had already forgotten who I was. That was the last time I saw her.

As I pondered our visit, I could not but delight in the power of non-verbal communication. Though I had tried to convince her I was her

grandnephew, she only recognized me in what seemed a small gesture, a token of my love: a kiss on her cheek. In the end, no matter how hard I tried, it was not the words, but rather the gesture, that opened a portal into her mind.

This powerful experience with my aunt is exactly how non-verbal communication works. That which appears simple or ordinary can hold great meaning. And when we lack the words to express our deepest feelings and emotions, gestures have ways to communicate these feelings and emotions in ways words cannot. That is why we send flowers when someone has died

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or bring food when someone is ill. These gestures are often more eloquent than any words we could speak.

Symbols work in a similar, though more profound, way. In a religious context, symbols create pathways and open portals into the mystery of our faith and even allow us to become part of the very mystery we celebrate.

Although we may not always be aware of them, religious symbols surround us in our churches and even in our homes. They remind us of our faith and support us in our private and public prayer as we celebrate the sacraments and engage in personal devotions.

There are ten chapters in this book. The first chapter distinguishes between signs and sym-

bols and between sacraments and sacramentals. The second chapter reflects on our human experience and the fundamental symbols that are used for the celebration of the liturgy: water, fire and light, oil, bread, and wine. The next two chapters look at the symbolic nature of the buildings in which we celebrate the liturgy and the symbolic contribution of the arts within them. The remaining chapters examine how liturgical furnishings, objects, vestments, and gestures function symbolically, concluding with considerations about the role of liturgical décor and sacred imagery. Each chapter ends with a set of questions intended to encourage individual or group reflection on the many symbols we encounter in our daily lives.



CHAPTER ONE



Signs and
Symbols;
Sacraments and
Sacramentals

When we lack the words to express our feelings, we often use non-verbal modes of communication. We send flowers on various occasions, and certain flowers carry very specific meanings. Roses, especially red roses, are often presented as an expression of affection and love. That is why they are so popular on Valentine's Day. However, if the affection is not mutual, the same flowers can be experienced as annoying or even considered a form of stalking. A simple bouquet of roses has the power to evoke a strong emotional response of love or fear, even without an explanatory note. The flowers themselves communicate the message.

Though spoken language remains our principal tool of communication, we also communicate through our body language, through the way we dress, through signs we have established, and through symbols we have discovered. These powerful non-verbal ways of communicating are important in our daily lives as well as in the way we share our faith and celebrate our sacraments and sacramentals.

Verbal Versus Non-Verbal Language

In our highly advanced society, people value verbal communication. We try to be careful and nuanced in what we say and how we say it. And, clearly, verbal communication sets people apart from other creatures and allows humans to communicate in much more complex ways. Yet, think of the difference between a conversation over the phone and a conversation that takes place in person, where we can read facial expressions and body language. The latter is

often more enlightening than the former.

Our body language can help or hinder our communication with one another, often without our express knowledge. Some years ago, I was presenting a lecture to a group of undergraduates at the University of Notre Dame on the topic of eucharistic miracles. Although this was before the introduction of PowerPoint, I was well prepared with slides, music, and poetry. Yet, none of the information about medieval eucharistic miracles seemed

IN THE MOST SIMPLE OF TERMS, A SYMBOL IS SOMETHING THAT CAN BE PERCEIVED BY THE HUMAN SENSES WHILE CALLING FORTH ANOTHER REALITY THAT IS USUALLY IMMATERIAL, NOT CONCRETE, AND UNABLE TO BE SENSED.

of interest to the students. They slouched in their chairs, yawned, stared out the window, and didn't take a single note. Afterward, one of the students thanked me for an outstanding lecture. Although I heard his words, it was hard for me to believe him because of his slouching body language throughout my presentation.

Though he said one thing, his body language communicated quite the opposite.

Body language is indeed quite powerful. A smile can imply joy at a reunion. Our tears reveal sorrow. A wink may disarm an otherwise tense situation with its playfulness.

When it comes to celebrating the liturgy, we are familiar with the different postures we take, such as genuflecting, blessing ourselves, kneeling, and the like. Yet, paying attention to our body language throughout the liturgy is of equal importance. Does our body language reflect respect and reverence for the sacrament we celebrate? Or does our body language communicate disinterest, boredom, or distraction? While this is particularly important for liturgical ministers, who are liturgical models, this also holds for the entire assembly.

Another form of intentional or unintentional non-verbal communication is the way we dress. When I was preparing to move to the United States, I was invited to a seminar on life in the United States held at the US Embassy in Brussels. One of the topics presented was on appropriate dress. The instructor suggested that people in the United States dress much more informally than Europeans. However, over the years, I have come to discover that there are different levels of informal dress. Informal dress appropriate for a baseball game is not the same as what might be worn for a company barbecue, while appropriate attire for the beach is different than what is worn for a run around the lake. Clothing indeed communicates much more than what the casual wearer might intend, even in the most informal setting.

This awareness of how clothing communicates becomes even clearer when we consider what is worn for more formal occasions. Most of us would not dream of wearing shorts, a rock-concert T-shirt, and flip flops to a funeral. Such an outfit fails to express the respect required by the occasion. Or, how confusing would it be if all women at a wedding wore long, white, elaborate gowns. Culture and custom dictate that only one woman wears white at a wedding, and that is the bride.

Clothes are also important for consecrated men and women, as they can be identified by what they wear. For example, Benedictines wear black habits, while Franciscans wear brown. Specific liturgical garb allows us to distinguish between deacons, priests, and bishops. And, for those of us in the assembly, does our attire reflect the reverence due to the sacrament we celebrate?

Signs and Symbols

Our world is filled with signs and symbols. Signs and symbols help us negotiate our daily lives and to co-exist with others, often without giving them much thought. We slow down and stop at a red light. We cross the street at a white-striped crosswalk. We give a heart-shaped box of chocolates on Valentine's Day. We exchange rings. We send flowers. We dip our fingers in Holy Water and make the sign of the cross. We light candles. We kneel in adoration. These are but a few of the many signs and symbols we encounter on a daily basis.

