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FORMATION IN RITUAL STUDIES: TOWARDS A BETTER APPRECIATION OF CATHOLIC SACRAMENTAL SYSTEM

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Abstract

For a long while, the Roman Catholic sacramental understanding has been built upon Thomistic philosophy that is foundational on Aristotelian metaphysics. This approach to sacraments and sacramentality often obscures seeing sacraments as what they really are: rituals. More than ever before, there is need, both in understanding and in practice, to have recourse to ritual dimensions of sacraments. Liturgical acts are essentially ritual actions and as such deserves such a consideration. However, In the wake of the post Vatican II liturgical reforms, Romano Guardini (one of the fathers of modern liturgical movement), in his open letter to a German conference on liturgy in 1964 made an apt remark that worths considering in the formation of 21st century priests. He remarked that despite the ritual and textual problems that come with the reform, “the central problem seems to me to be something else; the problem of the cult act or, to be more precise, the liturgical act. As I see it, typical nineteenth-century man was no longer able to perform this act; in fact he was unaware of its existence.” This essay therefore argues for the need of incorporating ritual studies into the formation of contemporary seminarians for a better understanding and practice of liturgical acts. The essay argues that ritual studies posits an invitation to a renewed understanding of sacrament and sacramentality. The ministers of the Word and Sacraments must be aware of the rituals they make, the inherent symbols, and how the symbols speak to the assembly that partake in the ritual actions. Also, needless to say that liturgical catechesis will become more common and effective, only if the teachers understand deeply the rituals they make, since *nemo dat quod non habet*.

Keywords: Sacrament, sacramentality, rituals, *ex opere operato*, symbols, ritual studies,

Introduction

One of the major lasting effects of the Second Vatican Council is the call for the revision of the rites of celebrating various sacraments in the Church. The entire reform of the liturgy – especially the celebration of the sacraments – is to emphasise the reality that liturgical acts are ritual actions.¹ As such the theology of the different sacraments should at the same time be directly drawn and inferred from the ritual practice. Little wonder that each general instruction to the various rites establishes the significance of the various liturgical celebrations upon the rite with which they are practiced. This is a deliberate move away from the scholastic approach to liturgical practices (prior to the Vatican II Council) which prioritizes the juridical implications of liturgical celebrations.

However, the reality on ground attests that the development that the reform of the liturgy by the conciliar fathers envisaged is still far from actualization in many quarters. In many places, the scholastic approach (using Thomistic philosophy built on Aristotelian metaphysics) to the sacramental system of the Church is still prevalent, and in many cases, the *only way* of understanding sacramental reality. The purpose of this presentation is to argue for another way of looking at the Catholic sacramental system – basically the meaning of sacraments and sacramental efficacy. It proposes that formation in ritual studies will enhance a better understanding and the practice of liturgy. The need for this formation in ritual studies was underscored by Romano Guardini, in his open letter to a German conference on liturgy in 1964 (few months after the call for revision of various rites) when he remarked that:

A mass of ritual and textual problems will present themselves and long experience has shown how much scope there is for a right and a wrong approach. But the central problem seems to me to be something else; the problem of the cult act or, to be more precise, the liturgical act. As I see it, typical nineteenth-century man (*sic*) was no longer able to perform this act; in fact, he was unaware of its existence. Religious conduct was to him an individual inward matter which in the “liturgy” took on the character of an official, public ceremonial. But the sense of the liturgical action was thereby lost. The faithful did not perform a proper liturgical act at all, it was simply a private and inward act, surrounded by ceremonial and not infrequently accompanied by a

feeling that the ceremonial was really a disturbing factor. From that point of view the efforts of those who concerned themselves with the liturgy must have appeared as peculiarities of aesthetes who lacked Christian sincerity.²

Guardini did not hesitate to acknowledge the importance of seeing liturgical acts as actions performed by sociological entities who are both human and spirit. He also pin-points the importance of the various elements – the time, place and things – involved in the external action called ritual. In these, one can deduce the inevitable call for formation in what will later be known as ritual studies for the better appreciation of the liturgical reform and the liturgy itself. He argues that the opportunity that the reform brings is the opportunity ‘to relearn forgotten way of doing things and recapture lost attitudes.’³ This is the same prospect that ritual studies offers.

This presentation will therefore proceed to highlight some justifications for the claim that ‘there is a forgotten way’ and ‘lost attitude’ to relearn and recapture respectively through formation in ritual studies. This will explore the patristic way of understanding sacramental reality vis a vis the renewed understanding of sacramentality today. Afterwards, the work will argue for the potency of ritual studies to illuminate catholic sacramental system.

Re-learning the Forgotten Way: Sacramentality Renewed

Before requesting for the revision of the various rites for celebration of the sacraments, the conciliar fathers acknowledged that there is a problem of a ‘forgotten way’ because ‘with the passage of time, (however), there have crept into the rites of the sacramentals and sacraments certain features which have rendered their nature and purpose far from clear to the people of today.’⁴ This reality calls for a reflection on the history and development of sacramental practice in order to highlight what was wrong and at what point.⁵ While this work cannot cover the scope, let it suffice to note that the understanding of sacrament and sacramental efficacy in the Church has not been the same all through the history of the Church. Recent scholarship now favours the patristic understanding over the rigid and strict scholastic meaning.

The Second Vatican Council brought with it a new way of understanding Sacramental Theology. More than ever before, the council emphasised that creation has the capacity to reveal God who is both transcendent and immanent. Therefore, the fathers assert that ‘there is scarcely any proper use of material things which cannot thus be directed towards the sanctification of men and the praise of God.’⁶ This teaching ignited a revolution in Sacramental Theology, and ‘Christian

theology today recognises that the ability of all creation to reveal the transcendent God is first and foremost through the initiative of God and then also because of the willingness of an immanent God to communicate that desire and allow it to be known in human heart.⁷ David Brown underscores these two attributes of God – transcendence and immanence – as unique ways of mediating divine presence through the material world. For him, transcendence does not mean absence; rather it stresses the otherness of God, while immanence makes possible his closeness.⁸

Sacramentality does not mean that God is in all things, but that all things are capable of revealing God (or at least something about God).⁹ It was Rowan Williams, the former Archbishop of Canterbury, who remarked that ‘sacramentality is not a general principle that the world is full of “sacredness”: it is the very specific conviction that the world is full of the life of God whose nature is known in Christ and the Spirit.’¹⁰ Since all of creation is the handiwork of God, creation possesses a bit of ‘God’ in them and are so enabled to ‘reflect’ God. Sacramentality thus ‘acts as a prism, a theological lens through which we view creation and all that is in this good earth as revelations of God’s presence and action among us here and now.’¹¹ Hence, sacramentality is a theological concept covering a vast sphere of reality and cannot be narrowed down to the ecclesial (seven) sacraments. In the words of Larson-Miller, ‘the elusive nature of the term “sacramentality” is its strength, in that it can lure Christians beyond the narrowness of ecclesial sacramental terminology to a broad context in which other terms can find a home, both contextualized and rational and capable of development.’¹²

The elusive nature of the term, ‘sacramentality’ recognised by Larson-Miller is not a new discovery. From the earlier usage of the term *sacrament* (from which sacramentality is derived), it has always carried a variety of meanings. Though Augustine refers to *sacrament* as ‘a sign of a sacred thing’ it was applied to a variety of realities.¹³ True to its etymological meaning, the Latin word for sacrament, *sacramentum* is derived from the word *sacrare* meaning ‘to make or be holy.’ It can refer to ‘a person or thing constituted holy by divine right, a function reserved for public authority to “consecrate,” the one who performs the consecration, the consecration itself, the person or thing consecrated, and the means used to effect it.’¹⁴ Also the word *sacrament* has a traceable root in the Greek term *mysterion*. In the New Testament, Paul uses *mysterion* to refer to the hidden plan of God (cf. Rom. 16:25-26). Also, in this Greek sense, *mysterion* means something unfathomable, something so extraordinary and overwhelming that it cannot be comprehended.¹⁵ It is in this light that Joseph Martos noted that ‘any ritual or object, person or

place, can be considered sacramental if it is taken to be a symbol of something that is sacred or mysterious.¹⁶

Furthermore, Augustine used the term ‘sacrament for three classes of things: (1) the religious rites of both the Old and New Testaments and rites of paganism, (2) symbols and figures, and (3) revealed teaching of the Christian religion.¹⁷ These include imposition of hands, blessed ashes, holy water, sign of the cross, ordination, religious profession, the Lord’s prayer, feasts, and the word *Amen* among many others.

While the term ‘sacraments’ in the Roman Catholic Church is often associated with the seven sacraments as defined by the Council of Trent (Baptism, Confirmation, Eucharist, Penance, Extreme-unction[now Anointing of the sick], Holy Orders and Matrimony), the renewed understanding of sacramentality has opened up deeper ways of understanding sacraments. Contemporary theology incorporates the patristic notion of sacraments into how sacraments should be understood today. Hence, we speak today of primordial sacraments – first to describe Christ and, second the Church¹⁸ –, the seven ecclesial sacraments and other sacramentals.¹⁹ Indeed, according to Paul Tillich, ‘any object or event is sacramental in which the transcendent is perceived to be present.’²⁰

Moreover, the theological principle of sacramentality justifies the use of earthly materials as sacred signs in the liturgy. Creation does not only reveal God, but also *praises* God in itself and through the works of human hands. Sacramentality is therefore based on the belief that everything God created is good and they can be used in the worship of God and the sanctification of humans. According to Irwin, ‘sacramentality is a worldview that invites us to be immersed fully in the here and now, on this good earth, and not to shun matter or avoid the challenges that such earthiness will require of us, even as we pray through liturgy and sacraments (and other means) to enter into heaven when this earthly pilgrimage has ended.’²¹ The engagement of humans with creation in its goodness continues the purpose of God in creation, reveals his presence among us and manifest his actions in and on us. Hence, ‘holiness, salvation, and redemption are given to us in the sacraments because of the principle of sacramentality and mediation.’²²

The fundamental means of mediation of the experience of the divine is through the human body. In recent times theologians pay more attention to the role of the human body in sacramental theology, perhaps partly because the body is ‘the physical channel of meaning.’²³ This attention is mainly due to ‘the recognition of the human being, inseparable from his or her context-dependence on the living organism of the earth, as the conduit through which any and all theology is

constructed.²⁴ In a sense, ‘sacramental theology is explicably a prayer of the body.’²⁵ This centrality of the human body in mediated liturgical experience is however not new as Tertullian had earlier asserted that the body is the instrument of salvation. For Tertullian, this is linked to the mystery of Incarnation. At the incarnation, the eternal Word of the Father took flesh and by so doing, he saved us and we in turn can come to worship God through our bodies with which we encounter all of creation. Narrating how the mediation works, the comment of Tertullian on the Resurrection of the flesh is enlightening:

The flesh is the hinge on which salvation depends. As a result, when the soul is dedicated to God, it is the flesh which actually makes it capable of such dedication. For surely the flesh is washed, that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is sealed, so that the soul may be fortified; the flesh is shadowed by the imposition of hand, that the soul too may be illumined by the Spirit; the flesh feeds on the body and blood of Christ, that the soul as well may fatten on God.²⁶

Though the actions Tertullian spoke of are specific to the sacraments of initiation, his assertion captures adequately what sacramental realities do. In this way, sacraments are seen first and foremost as ritual events and not a metaphysical reality.

Recapturing Lost Attitude: The Ritual Studies

This section of the presentation argues that through a formation in ritual studies, the faithful can develop the proper attitude towards the sacraments and its celebration. But what does ritual studies entail? In the words of Ronald Grimes:

there is a broad and narrow use of the term “ritual studies.” On the one hand, it means simply “the study of ritual” regardless of discipline and regardless of the status, professional or amateur, of those who carry it out. On the other hand, it refers to the study of ritual by scholars who devote most of their research time and energy to doing it. In the former sense, many engage in it; in the latter, few.²⁷

In this work, we shall consider ritual studies from the broad dimension. While many liturgical theologians are not schooled in this field (ritual studies), the works of experts in this field have been highly beneficial to the understanding of Christian rituals and liturgy in general. Their works give prominence to the various elements of rituals and that the elements are fundamental to understanding the belief of the people and their expression of such belief. Prominent among these are the works of Catherine Bell and Ronald Grimes, on which I will largely

depend in this section. Our aim here is to show in bits how ritual studies can illuminate our understanding of sacrament and sacramental efficacy through the interplay of the ritual elements.

But what is Ritual Studies? Ritual studies is ‘a unified, interdisciplinary approach which aims to avoid false conflicts and excessively narrow definitions of ritualistic phenomena.’²⁸ It is an interdisciplinary field that engages sociology, psychology and cultural anthropology. Since sacraments are for people (*sacramentum propter hominem*) who belong to a society (faith community), psychological, sociological and anthropological investigation (through ritual studies) into sacraments is apt in understanding sacramental efficacy. Michael G. Lawler rightly captures this interconnection between ritual studies and sacrament when he says: ‘an investigation of human behaviour and existence throws light on sacraments, just as sacraments are disclosive of the human experience and existence.’²⁹ Understanding what people do when they come together and how they make a meaning of what they do is key in understanding how what they do works by effecting what they intend. According to Louis Bouyer, ‘[I]ndeed, the more perfectly we know the human aspects of Christianity, the more perfectly we shall understand the part of it which is the result of divine intervention. This is not to say that the human and the divine should be found in it separated from one another. It is rather that the divine reveals itself in the transformation it effects in what is human.’³⁰

Every animal – rational, social or irrational – ritualizes. Ritual actions range from the actions carried out almost instinctively and without any consciousness to those that are planned for and even transcend our present situation.³¹ Ritual is basic to human activities like eating, drinking, exchanging pleasantries through handshake, moving about, mating, giving birth, dying, praying, celebrating anniversaries and so on. We engage in ritualizing to give ‘*stability to our behaviours and to serve as vehicle of communication.*’³² For this reason, Tom F. Driver concludes that ‘ritualization is our first language, not our “mother”, but our “grandmother” tongue, as such it is something we do not outgrow.’³³

Though rituals are generally human activities, in its technical usage, the term is considered to be ‘more fittingly applied to forms of religious behaviours associated with social transitions.’³⁴ In this sense, the behaviours - events, prayers, gestures and materials - involved in the celebration of sacraments fall within the scope of ritual activities. Despite the attempt to define ritual, one would admit that ritual is wider in scope than the descriptions. Because of this diffuse nature of rituals, scholars prefer to speak of family characteristics of rituals rather than giving a water-tight definition. In other words, there are some basic characteristics that a particular action should meet before it can be said to

be a ritual action.³⁵ Ronald Grimes highlighted different ways by which actions can be ritualized. These include by:

- Traditionalizing them, for instance, by claiming that they originated a long time ago or with the ancestors
- Elevating them by associating them with sacredly held values, those that make people who they are and that display either how things really are or how they ought to be
- Repeating them – over and over, in the same way – thus inscribing them in community and/or self
- Singularizing them, that is, offering them as rare or even one-time events
- Prescribing their details so they are performed in the proper way
- Stylizing them, so they are carried out with flair
- Entering them with a non-ordinary attitude or in a special state of mind, for example contemplatively or in trance
- Invoking powers to whom respect or reverence is due – gods, royalty, and spirits, for example
- Attributing to them special powers or influence
- Situating them in special places and/or times
- Being performed by specially qualified persons.³⁶

The celebration of the sacraments (and indeed all liturgy) can adequately be regarded as a ritual activity as it meets the characteristics laid out above. They are communal events developed over time by the Christian community, and are celebrated at particular times to enter into a hierophany. They are carried out at specific places by designated persons following the prescribed way of doing them. In carrying out these actions, *meaning* and *communication* become more important than mere function. As Grimes noted, when this happens, ritualization has begun to occur.³⁷

Liturgy, as human and divine action, cannot be spoken of except within the context of rituals. Little wonder Lawrence Hoffman considers liturgy as ‘acted-out rituals involving prescribed texts, actions, timing, persons and things, all coming together in a shared statement of communal identity by those who live with, through and by them.’³⁸ Liturgy, as a ritual event, is also underscored by the principle of sacramentality expressed above. To escape ritualization, we will have to escape our bodies, which is impossible.³⁹ The body that grounds the principle of sacramentality and mediation also makes ritualization an inevitable human activity. The reality of our lives is that ritual actions are always around us and are unavoidable. Despite all efforts of modern men and women to move away from rituals, we cannot do without them.⁴⁰

Kinds/Genres of Rituals

As pointed out, it is obvious that ritual actions are inevitably numerous since different ritual actions perform different roles at different moments. However, attempts have been made by scholars in the field to categorize the different kind of rituals in their study. For the purpose of our work, we shall focus on the six categories of ritual actions proposed by Catherine Bell.⁴¹ These are: rites of passage, calendrical rites, rites of exchange and communion, rites of affliction, feasting, fasting and festival; and political rites.

- a) **Rites of Passage:** These are the ceremonies that accompany and dramatize such events as birth, coming-of-age initiation for boys and girls, marriage, and death.⁴² These celebrate both biological and socio-cultural changes. These rites celebrate and facilitate real changes that take place in people's lives. In Christian liturgy, the celebration of the sacraments of Christian initiation (Baptism, Confirmation and Eucharist), matrimony, and holy Orders fall within this category, as do the rites of Christian funerals.
- b) **Calendrical Rites:** These are the 'rites that give socially meaningful definitions to the passage of time, creating an ever-renewing cycle of days, months and years.'⁴³ Some occasions are calculated with the solar calendar (like Christmas day on December 25 and New Year Day on January 1), while others are marked by the lunar calendar (e.g. Easter Sunday). The rites are celebrated periodically – annually or sometimes weekly (like the Sunday liturgy).
- c) **Rites of Exchange and Communion:** These are the rituals of making offering (often to a divine being) in order to receive a blessing in return. The process of making offering and receiving blessing also involves a communion, when there is a union of the human and divine worlds.⁴⁴ To some extent, the seven sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church are rites of exchange and communion as in them prayers are offered to God who in turn grants his blessings (or graces).
- d) **Rites of Affliction (Healing and purification):** These are 'the rituals that attempt to rectify a state of affairs that has been disturbed or disordered.'⁴⁵ Hence, they are also called rites of healing and purification. In the Christian liturgy, the sacraments of Reconciliation and Anointing of the sick readily comes to mind as healing rites. Also, the RCIA contains a number of rites that fall under this genre, among which are the anointings, laying on of hands, *ephphetha*, exorcisms and scrutinies.
- e) **Rites of Fasting, Feasting and Festivals:** These are 'rituals people often use to publicly express – to themselves, each other, and sometimes outsiders – their commitment and adherence to basic

religious values.⁴⁶ In feasting, sharing of food is involved as a sign of solidarity and charity, and in fasting, adherents abstain from food often as sign of contrition. In Roman Catholicism, the seasons of Advent and Lent are seasons of fasting. They are periods of preparation for festivals of the birth of the Lords on Christmas day and resurrection of Jesus on Easter day respectively. Though none of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church fall under this ritual, the ritual fast is often recommended for the reception of the sacraments, especially Eucharist.⁴⁷

- f) **Political Rites:** ‘These rituals can be said to comprise those ceremonial practices that specifically construct, display and promote power of political institutions (such as kings, state, the village elders) or the political interests of distinct constituencies and subgroups.⁴⁸ The rites are also called rites of power because they do not only give form to power and invest people with power; they also create power in the tangible exercise of it.⁴⁹ The rites by their very nature make power both tangible and effective.⁵⁰ The sacrament of Holy Orders celebrates a political rite where men are invested with the power of governance, and lay persons can also cooperate with the power of governance by the virtue of their baptism.⁵¹

The explanations of the different kinds of rites reveal that there are no strict rules demarcating the various rituals or restricting them to only a genre. For instance, the celebration of the sacrament of baptism or orders can at the same time reflect the aspect of rites of passage, of exchange and communion, of feast, and of power (political).

Elements of Rituals

In all the genre or kinds of rites discussed above, there are some fundamental elements that cut across them and are essential for the efficacy of the rites. As such, it is expedient that we analyse the elements of ritual in our process of understanding how they work. Ronald Grimes underscores the importance of this analysis for two other reasons.⁵² Firstly, such analysis guards one against oversimplification of ritual process and exposes how each of the elements contribute to or detract from the whole process. Secondly, it assists in noticing ritual transformation, recognising how the process develops or unfolds.

Grimes identified seven elements of ritual; viz: ritual actions, ritual actors, ritual places, ritual times, ritual objects, ritual language and ritual groups. He noted that there are no rigid rules about them or how the categories are named. Rather, what matters is how they interact; an interaction which is not predetermined by a theory but from observing specific ritual events.

- a) **Ritual Actions:** Though one can begin analysing a ritual with any element, ‘choosing ritual action as a default starting point is both pragmatic and a reminder to focus on ritual.’⁵³ It emphasises the fact that rituals are, foremost, actions of persons – human or divine. Ritual actions are different from mere movements in the sense that they are characterized by intention. ‘Things *move* but people *act*.’⁵⁴ Ritual actions carry with them the force of enacting through *inter-actions*. It is noteworthy that the aim of ritual action is not merely to entertain (even though sometimes it does), rather, they are designed to achieve an effect. Hence, we can say that ‘people *enact* rituals, especially when a rite seems capable of accomplishing a deed or bringing about an effect.’⁵⁵ Ritual actions do not speak for themselves in isolation, but in their interaction with other actions that precede or follow them. As such, the meaning of a particular action can be modified by the action that precedes or follows it.

In the context of Christian sacramental rituals of the RCIA, there are several ritual actions like kneeling, standing, laying on of hand, anointing with oil, profession of faith, movement to the font and signing of the senses. All these gestures and postures are not just to show something; but work in the ritual system to have a desired effect.

- b) **Ritual Actors:** Foremost, we must note that ritual actors are different from stage actors in that when the term ‘perform’ is used for both, they do not mean the same thing. The term ‘perform’ is only used for a ritual actor to underscore that his actions are done in the presence of people. In the case of a stage actor, he performs in the presence of people and he is supposed to be pretending (although they may in fact be).⁵⁶ Though the ritual actor may or may not be aware that he/she is being observed, his ‘performance’ is intended to effect something.

Ritual actors, like actions, do not act alone. As social agents, they also interact with other actors either as objects or subjects of various actions. Their actions are done among and with other people. Though ritual actors are distinguished as leaders or followers, ministers or candidates, every participant in a ritual event is important irrespective of the role they play. Even those who simply show up without ‘doing’ anything, other than observing, contribute to the ritual performance.

In Christian initiation, there are various actors at different stages. Prominent among these are the ministers (often the priest and catechists), catechumens, sponsors, and the entire congregation. The presence (and sometimes absence) of any of these actors play important role(s) at the various celebrations.

- c) **Ritual Place/Space:** Rituals always take *place*. Rituals are always sited in a location, even when ritual actors do not value the location. The spatial rootedness of the human life is key to understanding ritual places despite the claim that ritual sometimes involves the divine and trance experiences. The human body which makes human activities possible is spatio-temporal and cannot be conceived without a location, earthly or heavenly. Thus, a ritual place is any place where a ritual occurs. It is that ritual environment that ‘encompasses the totality of what surrounds it and interacts with it.’⁵⁷ In this sense, some rituals can only take place at some particular places, while others can take place anywhere. If some rituals are not done in the particular places demanded by their rite, they often lose their force.

Ritual space is basically marked by boundaries ‘implied by ritual actions, generating a centre and a circumference, both of which can fluctuate, the centre receding and advancing or momentarily disappearing altogether as subgroups disperse and re-congeal.’⁵⁸ However, this boundary marks are often delineated by walls forming the space into a building like a church or mosque. Ritual places should not be confused with sacred places. Grimes cautions that ‘even though ritual happen in places and make them ritual spaces, not all ritual spaces are sacred spaces, and not all sacred spaces are permanently so. The sense of a place can change, and a single person can hold conflicting attitudes towards a place.’⁵⁹

Ritual space/place both speak and act. A baptistry, for instance is capable of speaking of the history of salvation through its shape and the painting projected on the walls.⁶⁰ When the ritual place speaks, sometimes the meanings are to be inferred from the actions taking place there and sometimes it ‘speaks more clearly to those who have ears trained to hear what it says.’⁶¹ Rituals places can be shaped by ritual actions and at the same time they shape ritual actions. When people come into a ritual space for a ritual action, they leave with feelings, images and impressions of the space. The place gives meaning to what they do while what they do also gives meaning to the place.

- d) **Ritual Time:** Ritual actions, like every human activity has its starting point as well as its terminating point. Likened to performing arts, ‘rituals “eventuate.” They arise, persist for a while, and then disappear, perhaps leaving the traces on the environment, in memory or in text.’⁶² Ritual time can be spoken of in various ways. *The ritual duration* (length of a ritual performance measured by clock, bodily tiredness or position of the sun) is not always evident. *Ritual endurance* refers to how long a ritual last historically. *Ritual timing*

denotes ‘when’ – the day, hour, week, month, or season- of ritual occurrence. The timing of some rituals is fixed while some vary. Ritual timing serves various purposes and can affect what is being done. For instance, the same action performed at sunrise and midnight impacts the body differently and speaks different meanings. Ritual timing is purposeful, and this is evident in the case of Easter Vigil emphasising the darkness/light theme very evident in the service of the light, the exsultet, the readings and the baptismal liturgy. *Ritual regularity* refers to how often a ritual occurs in terms of the evenness of intervals between enactments.⁶³ *Ritual phases* are chronological subunits and can be mechanically marked by sounds or even without dividers. It often demarcates time for various actors to start or stop particular actions.

All these dimensions of ritual time are applicable to Christian rituals especially the rites of the Christian initiation. There are times for the different periods and stages of the catechumenate. The days for some rites - like acceptance into catechumenate, enrolment/election and scrutinies - are spelt out in the RCIA. The time for different actions like kneeling, laying on of hands and sending out after the liturgy of the Word are also marked. The Easter Vigil is the preferred night for the actual celebration of the sacrament when candidates journey from darkness into light.

- e) **Ritual Objects:** These are materials actively used in rituals. An object, irrespective of its material, content, beauty or conditions of its production, becomes a ritual object when it is used in ritual action or ritual space. Regarding the distinction between ritual object and sacred object therefore, Grimes noted that “‘sacred’ is about value; ‘ritual’ is about use.”⁶⁴ Among the ritual objects in the RCIA are water, oil, white cloth, and candle.
- f) **Ritual Language:** This includes ritual words, ritual sounds and ritual texts. Through these, *rituals declare facts, convey meaning and ‘do things.’* Like place and actions, words and music have the capacity to do work. They are capable to do so because in ritual (by extension in liturgy), words are used in symbolic context.⁶⁵ As symbolic language, words are used in ritual as performative utterances. Words, in this sense, do not just declare facts and convey meaning, but also accomplish tasks.⁶⁶ In the words of John L. Austin, under the necessary conditions, ‘saying it makes it so!’⁶⁷ For instance, ‘I pronounce you husband and wife’ in marriage, is not a mere declaration or the description of an action, ‘but the performance of a deed.’ In the same way, ‘I baptize you in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit’ goes beyond a narration of an

article of faith, but the performance of the action that cleanses the soul from sin and brings rebirth.

Regarding ritual texts (which are words, put in writing), Grimes opines that they function to facilitate ritual performance at least in two ways. Firstly, texts serve as mnemonic device as an alternative to memorization, and secondly, they function as ritual objects when in ritual performance they are ‘read aloud by leaders, tracked silently by followers, touched, fanned, elevated or revered.’⁶⁸ While ritual texts perform these dual function, it should be noted that performance do not always mirror the text, even when the leader is being prompted by or claims to be reading from the text. When performance and text do not tally, there are spectrums of possibilities of the meaning intended and meaning communicated.

- g) **Ritual Groups:** Rituals are built on affiliations.⁶⁹ People involved in ritual actions do not only do so as individuals but in interaction with other actors. Rituals always belong to a cultural home as they are created by a cultural group and enshrines the values of the group.⁷⁰ The group designs the ritual to meet the immediate and further needs of the group. As such, the general outlook of a group is reflected in its rituals. It is in this light that we can speak of the sacraments of the Roman Catholic Church or how the Eucharistic liturgy of the Roman rite can be distinguished from the Orthodox rite.

Ritual Process: How Rituals Work

In defining what rituals are, Grimes noted that they are ‘designed assemblages.’⁷¹ They are ‘designed’ because they are planned and constructed in a way that enables form and dynamic to flow to one another; and they are assemblages because there exist a sculptural technique of composing a group of unrelated, fragmentary or discarded objects into a work of art.⁷² The ritual elements create meaningful patterns when they overlap and interact with one another. Taking the case of performative utterances (ritual language) for instance, Austin noted that to claim ‘saying it makes it so,’ ‘it is always necessary that the *circumstances* in which the words are uttered should be in some way, or ways, *appropriate*, and it is very commonly necessary that either the speaker himself or the other persons should *also* perform certain *other* actions, whether ‘physical’ or ‘mental’ actions or even act of uttering further words.’⁷³ In other words, ‘ritual words’ actually work, not on their own but within the framework of the ritual process, the interaction of the ritual elements.

A deeper understanding of how ritual works is to consider ritual performance as symbolic events. This is possible because the elements

of ritual, (not just ritual language) are capable of being symbolic. Ritual actions, places, actors, objects, time, and group, act as symbols when interacting in a ritual process. As such, when we speak about ritual performance, we are at the same time speaking of symbolic events.

Symbols and Meaning

Symbols must be differentiated from signs even though the distinction is not clear-cut as it often seems. While a sign is just as much a reference to another reality, a symbol in one way or the other refers to itself, because it participates in the reality to which it refers.⁷⁴ While signs makes reference through a rational process and thus a product of agreement, symbols are perceived intuitively and touches the whole person at the level of feeling and the senses, and as such do not rest on agreements.⁷⁵ Consequently, while signs can be altered by agreement when its meaning is no longer clear, symbols call us to stop, ponder and meditate since it is 'the thing without being the thing, and yet is the thing.'⁷⁶ More importantly, signs have one clear meaning while symbols have multiple meanings. Symbols refer to deeper reality, a farther horizon, a wider landscape.⁷⁷

As an example, the red colour of the traffic light is a sign calling road users to stop. It simply calls them to stop and nothing more. The meaning of this sign is learned and that is why it is expected that all drivers should be able to know road signs and these signs are presumed to mean the same thing for every road user. To think of another meaning, no matter how little it differs, other than a call to stop, is to break traffic rule and perhaps cause accidents. If at a later time, the red sign no longer refers to 'stop,' it only needs to be changed by agreement. On the other hand, water being used in the sacrament of baptism carries a polyvalent meaning. It first partakes in the reality of washing which it symbolises. It could make reference to the baptism of Jesus and his mandate to his apostles to go and make disciples of all nations by baptizing in the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit (cf. Matthew 28:20). It may refer to the deluge in the time of Noah, or the exodus experience when the Israelites crossed the Red Sea and River Jordan. The immersion in the water could symbolise dying and rising, death and rebirth, movement of darkness and light (as the one being baptized could not see when immersed in water until he comes out), and even becoming a new creature coming out from dirt already washed. The sprinkling of holy water at celebrations could bring together all these meaning, and the meanings are endless. Because of its polysemic nature, if a symbol seems not to communicate a particular meaning (or the meaning is inaccessible to the observer or the observers are unable to decode the meaning), it does not call for a change through an agreement.

Rather, it calls us to pause and ponder on the reality unfolding before our senses. In relation to the sacramental symbols, rituals will facilitate the ability to 'pause and ponder'

Moreover, it is noteworthy to reiterate that the distinctions made between sign and symbol are not always clear as they might seem. Signs can become symbols and symbols can be reduced to signs. According to Susanne Langer 'it is the human operation that makes the difference between sign(al) and symbol... rather than words and images in themselves.'⁷⁸ Every word, image, object and action has the potential of multiple significance and multiple reference of language. The context in which they are employed and the interaction they have with other objects, words, image or actions provides the ground for their possibility of multiple meanings. The danger for observers or participants in a ritual performance (liturgy inclusive) is the temptation to reduce symbols to signs. Symbols are reduced to signs when we tend to restrict them to a particular meaning and not beyond that.⁷⁹ In Christian parlance, we should not think that the meaning of a ritual event consists of or is tied to the thoughts of a theologian, pastor or the Christian community that designed them. Rather, 'ritual meaning consists just as surely of the random thoughts and gestures that occur during the ritual.'⁸⁰ There is no doubt that official meaning provided by the Christian community or theologians can aid in giving insight to what is being done at liturgy. However, as David Power warns, 'any effort to tie down the meaning of liturgical symbols to a single or preconceived meaning thwarts their efficacy.'⁸¹ Rather, we are to allow other meanings to complement the other predominant meaning(s).

Sometimes, symbolic actions perform the mediation role. In this sense, the ritual process creates the atmosphere for the divine to work. The creation of the atmosphere consists in the overlapping of the meaning of the ritual space, the actions, objects and/or the performative language used. The rituals in the words of Joseph Martos works as 'doors to the sacred'⁸² leading the participants into an hierophany. Through the symbols therefore, we enter into the experience of sacred meaning.

The other way we can speak of how ritual works is in the light of means-end context. While this context may not be applicable to all rituals, Grimes argues that some rituals essentially work that way. Among these are the rituals of healing and fertility.⁸³ The sacrament of Anointing of the sick falls under this category. The prayers and the action of laying on of hands (symbolic action) and actual anointing with sacred oil (symbolic object) accompanied with prayers (symbolic words) serve the healing purpose through the means-end reasoning. However, this does not exempt the working of the divine agent (God), nor does it exclude the assertion that it also creates the atmosphere for the divine

work of healing or strengthening (among other meanings) that is intended and/or expected. Thus, Grimes says ‘rituals itself is sometimes considered a spiritual ecological technology.’⁸⁴

Conclusion

With these few tips on some aspects of ritual studies, it is evident that the formation of seminarians in ritual studies will go a long way in appreciating the Catholic sacramental system. The studies undertaken in Sociology, Cultural Anthropology and Psychology can be better directed to include how these sciences relate to the celebration of the sacramental mysteries. This will inevitably enhance the full, conscious and active participation that the Vatican II fathers advocated. In the same way, it opens a new way of considering the inculturation project that was encouraged by the council. Also, formation in ritual studies no doubt is a formation of the human person, enabling the person to appreciate signs and symbols in his environment and in worship. It sharpens one’s sense of the sacred and leads one to a hierophany.

Endnotes

¹ See Vatican Council II, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* no.63.

² See Romano Guadini, ‘Open Letter’ in *Foundation in Ritual Studies: A Reader for Students of Christian Worship*, eds. Paul Bradshaw & John Melloh, (London: SPCK, 2007), 4.

³ Ibid.

⁴ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no.62.

⁵ For a comprehensive treatment of the topic see Kevin W. Irwin, *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology*, (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 1 - 116; Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacrament in the Catholic Church* (Missouri: Ligouri Publications, 2014)

⁶ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no.61.

⁷ Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed: Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016), 6.

⁸ David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 40.

⁹ Far from equating this notion of sacramentality with pantheism, created materials are used in worship in relation to words and texts. It is only within the context of the words and texts that we speak of materials as used in the liturgy being means of speaking of God, experiencing God and worshipping God. See Kevin W. Irwin, *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 2016), 211-212.

¹⁰ Rowan Williams, Foreword to *The Gestures of God: Explorations in Sacramentality*, ed. Geoffrey Rowell and Christian Hall (London: Continuum, 2004), xiii.

¹¹ Irwin, 210.

¹² Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed*, 9.

¹³ See Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine*, Book II, 1:1 (NPNF Vol. II, p. 535)

¹⁴ Irwin, 11.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to the Sacrament in the Catholic Church* (Missouri: Ligouri Publications, 2014), 4.

¹⁷ See Irwin, 53.

¹⁸ See Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1963); Avery Dulles, *Models of the Church*, (New York: Image Books, 2002), 55 -67.

¹⁹ Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC no. 1667) says: Holy Mother Church has, moreover, instituted sacramentals. These are sacred signs which bear a resemblance to the sacraments. They signify effects, particularly of a spiritual nature, which are obtained through the intercession of the Church. By them men (sic) are disposed to receive the chief effects of the sacraments. And various occasions in life rendered holy. (See also *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 60).

²⁰ Martos, 3. Quoting Paul Tillich.

²¹ Irwin, 210.

²² Ibid., 214.

²³ Mary Douglas, *Implicit Meaning: Essays in Anthropology*, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975), 85.

²⁴ Siobhan Garrigan, *Beyond Ritual: Sacramental Theology After Habermas*, (Hampshire: Ashgate, 2014), 41.

²⁵ Nathan D. Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacrament* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 153.

²⁶ Tertullian, *On Resurrection of the Flesh*, Ch. 8. (ANF Vol. III p. 551).

²⁷ Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies* (Oxford: University Press, 2014), 7.

²⁸ Ronald L. Grimes, 'Modes of Ritual Necessity' *Worship* 53, no 2 (1979): 126.

²⁹ Michael G. Lawler, *The Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 1.

³⁰ Louis Bouyer, *The Rite and Man*, Trans. M. Joseph Costelloe (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1963), 2.

³¹ Ronald L. Grimes refers to them as different modes of ritual sensibilities. These are the attitudes that seem to predominate in a ritual performance. These are ritualization, decorum, ceremony, magic, liturgy and celebration. See Ronald L. Grimes, *Beginnings in Ritual Studies*, 3rd ed. (Waterloo, ON: Ritual Studies International, 2013), 35-50.

³² Tom F. Driver, *The Magic of Ritual: Our Need for Liberating Rites that Transform Our Lives and Communities* (New York: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991), 23.

³³ Ibid., 13.

³⁴ Victor W. Turner, *The Forest of Symbols: Aspects of Ndembu Ritual* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1967), 95.

³⁵ See Catherine Bell, *Ritual: Perspectives and Dimensions*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 138-169. Here, Catherine Bell identified six characteristics or ritual-like actions as: formalism, traditionalism, disciplined invariance, rule-governance, sacral symbolism and performance.

³⁶ Ronald L. Grimes, 'Religion Ritual and Performance' in *Religion, Theatre and Performance: Acts of Faith*, ed. Lance Gharavi (New York: Routledge, 2012), 39. Cited in Ronald L. Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 194.

³⁷ Grimes, 'Modes of Ritual Necessity,' 127.

³⁸ Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond The Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 3.

³⁹ Grimes, 'Modes of Ritual Necessity,' 127.

⁴⁰ See Leonel L. Mitchel, *The Meaning of Ritual*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), xii - xv. Here, Mitchel argues about the impoverishment of our age that only looks at the natural world and sees only a collection of physical phenomena, and as such claims that we can do without ritualization. For Mitchel, the question is not about if we can do without ritualization, but how do we understand religious rituals today. See also Mary Douglas, *Natural Symbols: Exploration in Cosmology*, 2nd ed. (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1973), 19-39.

⁴¹ See Bell, *Ritual: Perspective and Dimension*, 93-137. Ronald L Grimes highlighted twelve categories: rites of passage, funerary rites, marriage rites, festivals, pilgrimage, purification, civil ceremonies, rituals of exchange, sacrifice, worship, magic, healing rites, interaction rites, meditation rites, rites of inversion, and ritual drama. See Ronald L. Grimes, *Research in Ritual Studies* (Metuchen, N.J: Scarecrow Press, 1985), 68 -116. The categories given by Bell are more relevant to our work because they usually associated with clearly defined religious traditions, and have long been dominant examples and primary data for ritual studies. (Bell, 93).

⁴² Bell, 94.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 102.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 115.

⁴⁶ Bell, 120.

⁴⁷ Code of Canon Law, no. 919: "One who is to receive the Most Holy Eucharist is to abstain from food and drink, with the exception of water and medicine, for at least the period of one hour before communion."

⁴⁸ Bell, 128.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 129 citing Clifford Geertz, *Negara: The Theatre State in Nineteenth Century Bali* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1980), 102, 104, 131.

⁵¹ See Code of Canon Law, no. 129.

⁵² See Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 234-5.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 242.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 243.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 249.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 259.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 256.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 257.

⁶⁰ For further reading on symbolism of baptistries see Robin M. Jensen, *Baptismal Imagery in Early Christianity: Ritual, Visual, and Theological Dimensions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2012).

⁶¹ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 258.

⁶² Ibid., 263.

⁶³ Ibid., 266.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 267.

⁶⁵ See David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Language*, (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1984) 64-65. David Power noted that words/language can be used in three different contexts. He wrote: 'There are three contexts in which the lexical significance of words, or the primary nature of things and actions, receives determination of meaning and designation. The first context is the ordinary, everyday affairs. Here the people are concerned to deal with situations and interact among themselves in common sense, practical fashion, and so eliminate ambiguity as far as possible. In this world, it is preferable for words, things and actions to have clear purpose and meaning. A jug is meant to hold liquids, a knife to cut, announcement of time to eat is clearly an invitation In the second context, the world of science, meanings are more abstract in character, but they are still clearly and technically defined. Equivocity or polysemy is not considered a virtue. Mathematical symbols, the naming of chemical elements, types of experiments, the forms of logical reasoning, all eradicate the multiplicity of meanings as far as possible, because the world ruled by science and technology runs better when meanings and uses are fixed. In contrast to both the uses of sign and language, the world of the symbol, the third context, intentionally deploys the multiple possibilities of meaning. A flag flying on top of a building recalls past history, evokes in the passer-by a sense of national pride, and reveals the parliament is in session, all at once. In this case, although the immediate obvious functional indication is that the country's legislators have not gone home, the whole setting is symbolic in intent.'

⁶⁶ Grime, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 276.

⁶⁷ John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), 8.

⁶⁸ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 278.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 279.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 282. See also Ronald L. Grimes, *Deeply Into the Bone: Re-Inventing Rites of Passage* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 3-4.

⁷¹ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 232.

⁷² Ibid.

⁷³ Austin, *How to Do Things With Words*, 8.

⁷⁴ See Gerard Lukken, *Ritual in Abundance: Critical Reflection on the Place, Form and Identity of Christian Ritual in Our Culture* (Leuven: Peeters, 2005), 19 -20.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Ibid., citing T. Todorov, *Théories au symbole* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1977), 239.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 18.

⁷⁸ David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches*, 69. Citing Susanne Langer, *Feeling and Form: A Theory of Art* (New York: Scribner's, 1957), 26.

⁷⁹ For further readings on the fields of meaning, see Lawrence Hoffman, "How Ritual Means: Ritual Circumcision in Rabbinic Culture and Today" *Studia Liturgica* 23 (1993): 79-84.

⁸⁰ Grimes, 'Mode of Ritual Necessity,' 140.

⁸¹ Power, *Unsearchable Riches*, 67.

⁸² Martos, 8.

⁸³ Grimes, *The Craft of Ritual Studies*, 298.

⁸⁴ Ibid.