

Symbol of What We Are

Liturgical Perspectives on Sacramentality

Congress Statement
Societas Liturgica – Leuven 2017

[FINAL VERSION]

In its long and respectable history, Societas Liturgica has never devoted explicit attention to a general theory, or *theology*, of sacramentality. Individual sacraments have been the object of intensive research and discussions – most recently baptism at the 2011 Reims Congress. At this congress, however, we will focus on the principle that God uses visible signs to convey his grace. Therefore, it seems particularly interesting and timely to focus today on sacramentality. In addition it seems appropriate to consider sacramentality as a profound characteristic of human experience. Therefore, Societas Liturgica invites all its members and anyone interested in the theme to reflect and discuss on the following topic at its 26th International Congress to be held in Leuven: ***Symbol of What We Are: Liturgical Perspectives on Sacramentality.***

Sacraments and sacramentality have meant many different things throughout the history of Christianity, from the *septenarium* of the Roman Catholic tradition to the interpretation that there are only two sacraments, which is characteristic of many communities issuing from the Reformation traditions. However, at this congress we deliberately want to go beyond sclerotic doctrinal conflicts and open a whole field of human, liturgical and theological interest. One could preliminarily define ‘sacramentality’ as the Christian determination of sacred actions, persons, things, and phenomena, which in one way or another inscribe them in the grand history of salvation and which mediate Christ’s paschal mystery. This mystery, moreover, is considered to be a gift or grace of God for humanity, which is both equipped and invited to ‘actively participate’ in it. Practices of Christian worship have always played a key role in this complex history of mediation, appropriation, and interiorization. The horizon at the background of which they emerge is created reality, since as embodied expressions, they are embedded in physical materiality. It seems, moreover, that there are many questions related to this reality which one may rightly call ‘sacramentality’, and that they are very pertinent today. There are at least five possible entries into this theme, all of which are particularly relevant for liturgical scholars.

- (1) There are several layers, dimensions or possible meanings of sacramentality in the documents of the earliest Christians, especially in the Bible. The Old and New Testaments reveal varied approaches to holiness, sanctification and sacredness, which definitely deserve to be studied and (re)interpreted today. In addition, there are many Church Fathers who have presented thought-provoking accounts of sacramentality, whether or not relying on Scripture. Evidently, the central notion of ‘mystery’ is crucial in this context. Liturgical scholars of the 20th century have devoted particular attention to the concepts of mystery and sacrament in ancient Christianity and have developed theories how they connect with cult and liturgy. They established clear theological connections between the Christ and the Church, both of which they understood as ‘sacramental’, convinced as they were that sacraments have above anything else to do with the active and dynamic love of the Trinity. However, it would be good to reopen the file and (r)evaluate the many results of previous research.
- (2) Sacraments have become an increasingly strange reality for many people, at least in the area generally referred to as ‘the West’, where Church attendance has been in steady decline for

several decades – but probably also elsewhere. Many people no longer have any notion of what sacraments are, mean, and (can) achieve. In addition, Christians seem to disagree among themselves about what the sacraments accomplish. There have been many theological debates about the correct interpretation of the sacraments. At the same time, however, sacramentality could be seen as a dimension of the life-world of people that can be addressed as a kind of openness for transcendence, a sense of wonder, an experience of deep connectivity, etc. Inasmuch as liturgical scholars are specialists of the Christian ritual repertoire, they may have an interest in sacramentality understood as the field where the connection can be made between the life of people on the one hand and Christian celebrations, rites, prayers and sacraments on the other.

- (3) Sacramentality has been a major preoccupation of theologians of the past and present. Many Christian thinkers have made/are making serious efforts to understand and explain what sacramentality is and what a sacramental experience could be. In this vein attempts have been made to define Christianity's fundamental sacramental principle. Realities as broad as the Church, the Christ event, buildings, metaphors, actions, symbols, music and objects have been qualified as sacramental. Some theologians have understood sacramentality in a very broad sense, whereas others have been much more restrictive in using this category – differences which no doubt run through, and not only alongside, denominational borders. Liturgical scholars may have a lot to say about what it is that connects the diverse realities that have been called sacramental and may help develop an appropriate criteriology adapted to different contexts in the early twenty-first century.
- (4) Anthropologists and historians have researched and reflected about the complex issue of sacredness. Numerous are the accounts where a clear distinction has been made between the sacred and the profane. People's behavior is believed to be different in either realm. Ordinary activities of walking and eating as well as simple actions like touching, speaking and singing are loaded with a completely different meaning in a sacred or sacramental environment. Liturgical scholars probably have a peculiar feeling for these differences and may have apt intellectual models to interpret and explain the specificity of a Christian sacramental regime.
- (5) Within the area of spirituality, sacramentality appears to be a key to understand the experience of people as well as the variegating interpretations given to it. Inasmuch as human beings are holy, and/or called to holiness, a certain understanding of sacramentality is involved. Liturgical scholars, again, seem to dispose of a particularly useful expertise to interpret the connection between the Christian sacramental household and the life of people.

In line with the above reflections we invite the membership and all participants to present papers with a thematic link with one of the seven research axes below.

Research axis 1: *Sacramentality: Interdisciplinary Perspectives* [philosophy; cultural theory]

From a contemporary philosophical perspective: what are we talking about when we use the concept of sacramentality? Where and how does sacramentality occur in contemporary cultures? What is symbolic communication? What happens in our brains when we are involved in sacramental practices? What can insights from neurology teach us in terms of symbolic ways to connect and to communicate with one another? Which modifications do cyberspace and the digital era bring along in terms of embodiment?

Research axis 2: *Sacramentality and Sacrality* [anthropology; religious studies; ritual studies]

Are human beings naturally equipped with a sense of the sacred? Is Christian sacramentality different from a generally religious sacredness? What would be the most appropriate standard or criterion to distinguish between the two? Or is it impossible, or not opportune, to make such a distinction? What can liturgical scholars learn from anthropologists in this respect? Which are concrete shapes, types or forms of sacramental practices and behavior empirical research(e)r(s) observe and discern? To what extent is it possible to interpret these practices in terms of a dynamic between (or beyond) disenchantment and re-enchantment?

Research axis 3: *Sacramentality in Scripture and Ancient Christianity* [Biblical studies; Church history]

What role does sacramentality play in the writings of the Old and the New Testaments? How is the issue addressed and expressed in different texts? What interpretations did the Church fathers and early liturgical and disciplinary documents give to sacramentality and mystery? What can, or should, liturgical and sacramental theologians today bear in mind when they deal with this heritage and these witnesses? How did theologians of the past interpret the sacramentality of the Word?

Research axis 4: *Sacraments and Liturgy* [systematic theology; history of theology]

What is the relation between sacraments and liturgy? Is liturgy always, or necessarily, or never, sacramental? Are sacraments always, and necessarily, liturgical? What could liturgical scholarship contribute to a (general) theology of sacraments? Why is it that classical sacramental theologians largely overlooked the concrete ritual and eucharistical shape of the liturgy? How did theologians, synods and councils conceive of the relation between liturgy and sacraments in the past? How are sacraments (best) passed on to future generations? In what sense are they means of salvation? How would a liturgical and/or sacramental hermeneutics of tradition look like?

Research axis 5: *Disputes about Sacraments and Sacramentality* [ecumenism]

What are the major differences among Christian Churches and traditions in terms of their dealings with sacraments and sacramentality? What explains the emergence and tenacity of these differences? Are they still relevant today, and why (not)? To what extent does liturgical scholarship help overcome, or, reversely, reinforce, denominational differences? What would be the most significant contribution of liturgical scholars to the present state of affairs *in oecumenicis*?

Research axis 6: *Sacramentality and Pastoral Liturgy* [practical theology]

Why would it be necessary or interesting to take initiatives for enhancing sacramentality in the life of worship of Christian communities today? Is there a link between sacramentality and Christian community building? Can and/or should one promote people's (innate) sense for the sacred to foster Christian sacramentality? In this respect, is it particularly fruitful today to draw from the tradition of mystagogical catechesis? Can one understand the promotion of Christian sacramentality as initiating someone into the mysteries of faith? What are good examples, or 'best practices', of promoting an authentic Christian sacramentality?

Research axis 7: *Sacramentality, Salvation, Sainthood and Sanctification* [liturgical theology; (liturgical) spirituality]

What is the relation between sacramentality, salvation and sanctification? How does the celebration of the liturgy bring about salvation and sanctification? What is sacramental grace? And how does it relate to human freedom? Can the effects of the sacraments be conceptualized in terms of sanctification? What is the relation between the history of salvation, sanctifying practices and celebrating the liturgy? How do liturgy and sacramentality relate to eschatology? And how do they (at the same time) relate to the concrete (daily) life of people? What can reflections on sacramentality contribute to people's coping with crises the world today is facing (in terms of war, the environment, violence, health, food, etc.)? What is the relation between sacramentality and (the development of) one's personality? Is it appropriate and preferable to attribute holiness to persons?

How would that holiness be related to Christian sacramentality and the universal call to sainthood?
What perspectives and potential does the liturgy have to stimulate sainthood and a sacramental life?