

# More Than Just Words: Unlock the Symbolic Mystery of the Mass

## 1.1.1 Why are liturgical symbols important for catechesis?

Symbols are the language of the liturgy--the vocabulary

- All symbols convey meaning, which is what language does
- So if I use the word, "water," English-speakers "decode" that and recall their own experience of water
- If I instead show you a glass of water, or pour water over your hand, that also conveys meaning
- If I throw you into a pool of water or into a river or into the ocean, the meaning of "water" grows deeper and more complex
- In the liturgy, we use these deeper, more complex symbols to convey deep meaning

Symbols communicate deep meaning

- Our goal with liturgical symbols is to convey "God"
- The word "God" conveys meaning; but like the word "water," it is a bit flat
- If I could show you a glass of God or a pool of God, that would convey more meaning
- So instead we use liturgical symbols that convey the deep meaning of the mystery of God

Symbolic language transcends culture and the barriers of spoken language

- So, using water as an example, if I said to you, "God is like water," you would have some idea of "God"
- But if you don't speak English, you wouldn't know anything more about God from what I said
- If, however, I take you to church, make the sign of the cross over you, and then throw you or your baby into a pool of water, you start to get some idea of "God"

Symbols speak to the heart and the emotion and therefore more readily lead to conversion

- If instead, I poured a few drops of water on your hand or your head, you would still get a little idea of "God"
- But compare that to being thrown into a pool. Which experience conveys deeper meaning?
- Symbols are important for liturgical catechesis because they clutch our hearts and our emotions and say things about God that can be said in no other way

## 1.1.2 What is a symbol?

A symbol is not fake or a mere representation of something "real"

- A symbol is not merely "like" the meaning it is trying to convey
- It is actually part of the reality itself

A symbol points to a larger reality, while at the same time participating in that reality

- So God is not only "like" water
- In some ways, God is water. It is not just water that washes away sin, but the Godliness or holiness of the water
- It is not a one-to-one correlation; God is bigger, deeper, more mysterious than the water
- But the water "participates" in the reality and meaning of "God"

A symbol is a concrete, tangible "something" that gives us a glimpse of a deeper mystery that is otherwise unknowable

- To try to give someone the full meaning of God is not possible
- I can't give you a glass of God or a pool of God
- But I can give you a glass or a pool of water and, through that symbol, give you a glimpse of God
- The touch, taste, smell, and look of a concrete object can convey meaning about a larger, unseen reality
- And that is the only way to convey that otherwise unknowable reality

Literally means "throw together"—like a good metaphor

- The way this works is by taking two realities and throwing them together
- "Washing" and "divine healing"
- "Dying" and "resurrection"
- "Quenching thirst" and "spiritual peace"

There is a difference between primary and secondary symbols

- This "throwing together" process really only works with fundamental, earthy things
- It is more difficult to convey meaning with less substantial things
- A pool of water vs. a felt banner with blue waves on it
- A live candle flame vs. an electric candle
- Balsam scented oil vs. a plaster cast of a descending dove

### 1.1.3 How do symbols catechize?

To catechize well, a symbol has to be "big"; there must be many avenues of entry

- A glass of water vs. a pool of water
- A bonfire vs. a Hibachi for Easter Vigil
- A thumbprint of oil vs. pouring oil over someone's head

A symbol has to be experiential; if it is an object, it is an object that is used for something

- A pool of water vs. pushing someone down under the water
- A jar of oil vs. pour the oil onto someone
- A wedding ring in your pocket vs. placing the ring on the finger of your beloved

A symbol has to be authentic; it has to be as real as the mystery it is teaching about

- It is difficult to convey deep meaning with a symbol of a symbol
- Something that is "like" fire or "like" water will not convey the depth of meaning that fire or water itself conveys

A symbol has to cause questions

- I think sometimes we use artificial symbols because they are tidier
- Electric flames are easier to manage than real fire
- But it is the "untidiness" that causes questions
- And when someone has a question, that is an opportunity for teaching

A symbol must be "awesome"

- In the same way, the symbol must induce awe
- A boring symbol doesn't teach much
- An awesome symbol almost teaches itself

The catechesis that flows from the experience of symbols is mystagogical--a reflection on experience

- Almost
- To unlock full catechetical power of a symbol, we have to reflect on it
- Our reflection is systematic
  - What happened?
  - What did you feel?
  - What did it teach you?
  - How will you act differently?

### 1.1.4 What if we base all our RCIA catechesis on ritual symbol?

Our experience of Christ would grow stronger

Our faith would grow stronger

Our worship would grow stronger

Our bonds with each other would grow stronger

Our ability to do Christ's work in the world would grow stronger