

Signs and symbols of nature in the Sacrament of Reconciliation

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The sacraments are perceptible signs (words and actions) "of the hidden reality of salvation" (CCC 774) that use elements of material nature to make visible the invisible, realizing "effectively the grace they signify" (CCC 1084). In them, "nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life" (LS 235). They also show the eschatological dimension of creation, because "all the good which exists here will be taken up into the heavenly feast"[1].

Symbolic actions, such as the imposition of ashes at the beginning of the Lenten season, fully show the bond that exists between our sins and the cry of the earth. One of the expressions indicated for this Rite says: "Remember that you are dust and dust you will return" (Gn 3:19). In addition to reminding us that we too are dust of the earth, an integral part of nature, that ash can express also the cry of the earth, burned and reduced to dust by consumerism and human selfishness.

The celebration of reconciliation will be even more significant if signs and symbols of this type are properly used. In fact, some Protestant churches have already begun to use them in this sense[2].

The sacrament of reconciliation and the relationship with the earth

Despite the serious ecological crisis, "caused by our irresponsible and selfish behavior" (WDC 2016, 1), the rite of the sacrament of reconciliation does not include explicit references to the harm that each sin causes in our relationship with creation. Usually, this dimension is also absent in the pastoral practice of the sacrament.

The human being "expresses and perceives spiritual realities through physical signs and symbols" (CCC 1146); i.e., the baptismal water, the oil of the catechumens and the sick, the candles, the Easter fire, the incense... Any of those natural elements is used "not as an autonomous, self-sufficient reality, but as incorporated into the life and the history of the community"[3]. In fact, people should always perceive the liturgical celebration as an event of salvation, not as magic.

Likewise, it would be convenient that the praxis of the sacrament make use of signs and symbols of nature, especially in community celebrations, to highlight our connection with the earth and our need for reconciliation with it. Unfortunately, it is often celebrated with neither Bible readings nor significant symbols and bodily gestures.

Celebration of the restored fraternity

The *Rite for the Reconciliation of Individual Penitents* keeps being the most used and its praxis does not usually include any joyful

celebration for the gift of having been forgiven and reconciled. Without it, the perception and assimilation of the salvific event becomes more difficult. On the contrary, the three parables of forgiveness (the Lost Sheep, the Lost Coin and the Lost Son) included in *Lk* 15, end with a joyful communitarian celebration.

Including a joyful celebration, the sacramental reconciliation would help people perceive that the world is "a joyful mystery to be contemplated with gladness and praise" (*LS* 12).

Conclusion

This article has underlined the sacramental dimension of the physical world and the presence, in the liturgy of the sacraments, of signs and symbols taken from nature. This is lacking in the current Rite of the sacrament of reconciliation which should also give more relevance to the joyful celebration of pardon and reconciliation graciously received from God.

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[1] LS 244. These paragraphs are taken from: Carbajo-Núñez, Martín, «Peccato ecologico e riconciliazione sacramentale», in A.V. Amarante – F. Sacco, ed., *Riconciliazione sacramentale. Morale e prassi pastorale*, Messaggero, Padova 2019, 217-227.

[2] "Our waste and pollution of your creation, and our lack of concern for those who come after us, we confess to you." *Evangelical Lutheran Worship*, Pew edition, Augsburg Fortress, Minneapolis 2006, 253.

[3] M. Gesteira Garza, *La Eucaristía misterio de comunión*, 223. [My translation]



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