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Faith Today

Life's symbol pleasures

By Father Ronald Krisman
NC News Service

When was the last time you thought of work around the house as prayer?

How often this year will you sit outdoors contemplating the beauty of nature?

Have you enjoyed the experience of dining (not simply eating) today?

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Each question asks not simply about some external action but whether these quite ordinary actions contain a deeper meaning for us. The answers provide a partial understanding of the importance of symbols.

What is at stake is the grand vision of life.

There are patterns to our daily activities. The same actions may be performed in the same way by two people but can have tremendously different effects.

The difference depends upon whether one perceives a deeper reality. What is experienced by one person as boring and routine may be another person's daily communion with God.

Symbols relate to this deeper vision. They point to a purpose behind everyday actions. Do these actions express an underlying reality? Or are the daily activities of shuttling children to school and scout meetings, putting in eight hours at the office or factory, shopping for groceries and saying night prayers only routine?

The word "symbol" has been defined and interpreted in numerous ways by theologians, philosophers, anthropologists and psychologists. What their various descriptions have in common is the fact that symbols are actions or things which present an objec-

tive, visible meaning behind which an invisible, more profound meaning is hidden.

Religious rituals fulfill this description, but so do wedding rings and the flags of various nations.

The liturgy of the Catholic Church is rich in the use of symbols: bathing with water, rubbing on oil, breaking the bread of life, eating and drinking, gathering to hear the ancient words of our story spoken again.

Such symbols are quite ordinary in the sense that they are basic human activities.

But they are more than that. For they contain the potential of carrying us to another level of reality. Here we meet God and find the meaning of our lives in relationship to God.

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The symbols of our Christian faith are intimately bound up with our religious story. Christianity is a story about people like us who have had an experience of a living God who cares for their every need...

God feeds us.

It is the story of a God who chooses a people and gives them the special mission to make known that divine presence in the world...

God anoints us.

It is a story rooted in the experience of the ancient Hebrew mystics who knew that creation is good and that the human person has been created in the image of the creator...

God shares the divine life with us.

Our Christian story is told not only in words. Symbolic ritual activities — the church's liturgical celebrations — are even more effective than words in bringing to our awareness the reality

and mystery of God's nurturing, strengthening and vivifying activity in our lives.

As important as it is to hear that God loves us, experiencing the symbols of that love in the sacraments brings us into closer touch with the mystery.

Christianity did not begin with an elaborately formulated set of dogmas and moral norms. It began with rituals, because there was no better way to express the reality of Jesus Christ. And these rituals were not invented by Christians.

After the resurrection of Christ the two disciples on the road to Emmaus walked with the Lord but failed to recognize him until they sat down at table and broke the bread, the same gesture they used every day at mealtime. But suddenly the gesture symbolized and brought about not simply hospitality and friendship but actual communion with the Lord himself.

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Thanks to television, the cinema, music and the printed word, contemporary Americans are bombarded with plenty of images. But the multitude of images may mask the fact that we have

fewer and fewer symbols — those actions and things which carry meaning for the whole of life.

In fact, some people worry that we are losing touch with all the symbolic dimensions of life.

We need to nourish our sense of the symbolic. On the sacramental level, liturgical symbols should be used with utmost care and respect so they will communicate the reality of God's presence.

But we also need to see the symbolic in all our daily activities. By becoming aware of God's constant presence, we may learn to view the ordinary affairs of life as another invitation to experience God more deeply.

(Father Krisman is associate director of the bishops' Committee on the Liturgy.)



A meal shared. Nature experienced. Even the daily routines and ordinary struggles of life can hold symbolic meaning, writes Father Ronald Krisman. This symbolism points us toward the most profound corners of our existence.