

## A symbol come to life

By Joe Michael Feist  
NC News Service

"There was an elderly woman in the parish. I saw her at Mass every day. One day her husband died. At morning Mass the next day, it came time for the sign of peace. Instead of everyone just shaking hands with the person next to them, every person in the church got up out of their pews, walked over and embraced the woman."

What does the story illustrate? Father Robert Duggan, who observed the incident and related the account, believes it is a powerful example of a symbol come to life.

Father Duggan, who teaches classes on the sacraments and liturgy at the Washington Theological Union and The Catholic University of America, both in Washington, D.C., feels that an understanding of symbols is essential to a full appreciation of the church's worship.

A sign — a plus sign in math or a stop sign at a busy intersection — has a single meaning that is generally accepted by everyone, he said.

But the meaning in a symbol cannot be captured in a single expression, Father Duggan said. "A symbol is inexhaustible in its meanings."

The form the liturgy takes — the ritual — is "a series of symbols," Father Duggan noted. These include the objects, gestures, postures and other actions at Mass or during celebration of the other sacraments.

But more than these, said Father Duggan, the action of the Mass itself is a symbol: the bread being broken and shared, the wine shared.

"Worship is laden with meaning," Father Duggan said, "It requires symbol to carry it."

Without symbols, he concluded, people could not begin to comprehend the depth and the immensity of what they participate in during worship.

Father Duggan, who is also an associate pastor in Garrett Park, Md., said that the renewal of the liturgy initiated by Vatican Council II had a great effect on our understanding of symbols. During this period, efforts have been undertaken to make symbols more expressive, clearer.

Also there has been a "paring away of secondary symbols" in the liturgy such as the repetition of genuflections and the sign of the cross by the priest, Father Duggan said.

The primary symbols should stand out, he believes. One such symbol is the gathering of the

community itself.

This "idea of the community gathered is not represented if the church is half-empty," said Father Duggan. He indicated one way of approaching this problem is by scheduling fewer Masses. At the least, he said, the people present — the community gathered — should be close together, not scattered one by one through the church's large space.

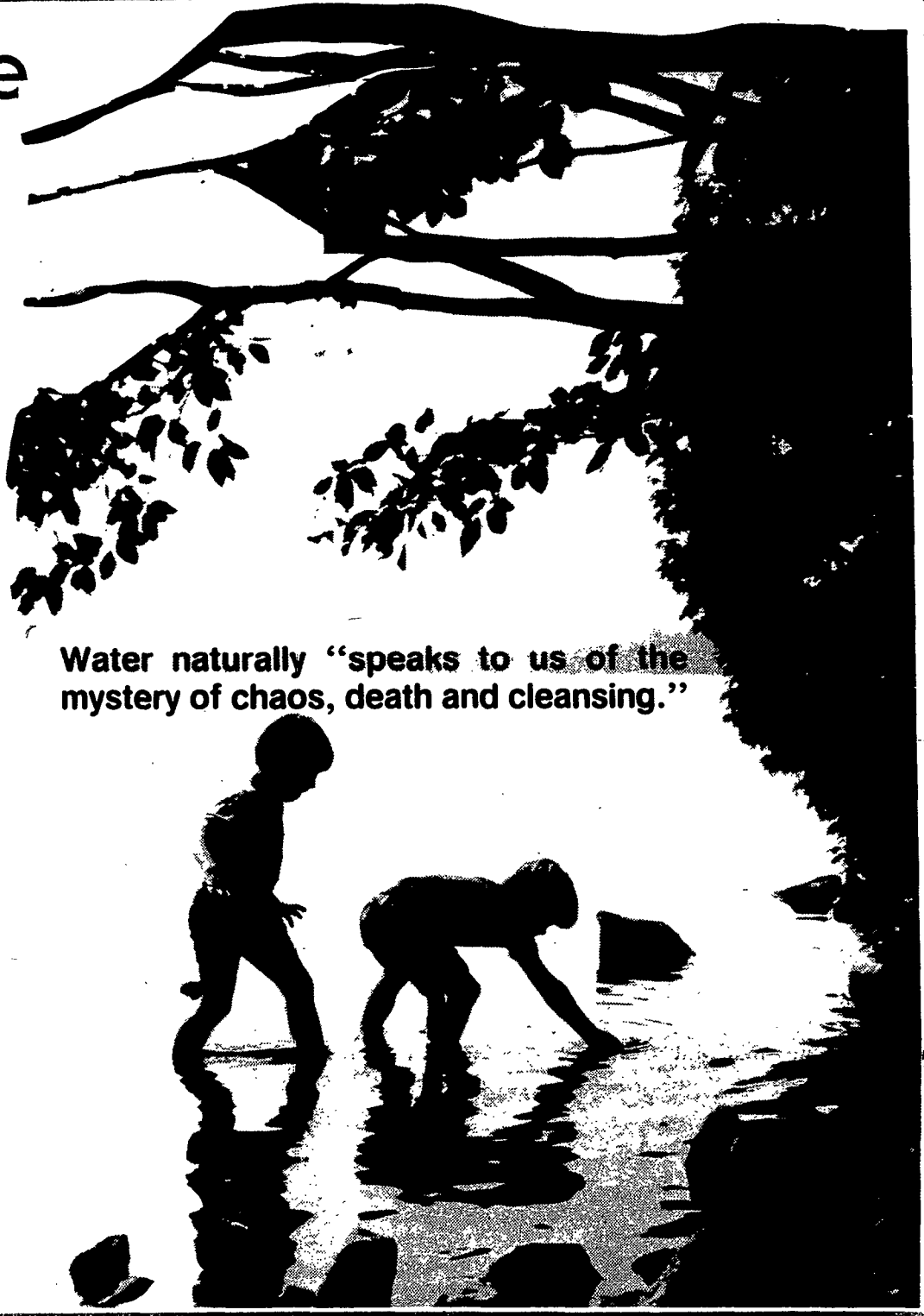
It is important in liturgy, Father Duggan indicated, to make the symbols as "full and expressive" as possible. For example:

- Baptism speaks of a cleansing, a new life. A few drops of water at baptism is not a full use of symbolism. Father Duggan says the water should be generously poured or, if possible, there should be full immersion.

- The symbolism of the readings at Mass as words of life is lost if the reader uses a cheap missalette rather than an impressive lectionary, Father Duggan said.

Which brings us back to the just-widowed woman who was embraced by the community gathered at Mass. In that case, said Father Duggan, "the symbol, the sign of peace, became something rich and full. It conveyed profoundly the meaning it was meant to embody."

(Feist is associate editor of Faith Today.)



Water naturally "speaks to us of the mystery of chaos, death and cleansing."

## Beyond mere words — actions that

By Father John Castelot  
NC News Service

Why did some people become so furious when Jesus ate with people they considered sinners — people like tax collectors (Luke 15:1-2)?

It wasn't simply because he ate with them. Rather, eating with these people was a powerful symbol. As the Chinese say, "A picture is worth more than a thousand words." That is what caused the anger.

Meals were significant events. They symbolized the unity of those who took part in them. The same food — and food is a source of life — entered all who ate together.

So when Jesus ate with sinners, it signified his intimacy with them in a way no other action could. Some self-righteous people

doubted that such riffraff had a right to be drawn into this closeness with Jesus. After all, Jesus professed to be a teacher of God's truth, a herald of his reign.

Even more important, banquet celebrations symbolized the celebration at God's table. When a prophet of the school of Isaiah wanted to picture the establishment of God's reign at the end of time, he chose this symbol:

"On this mountain (Zion itself, a symbol of the heavenly realm) the Lord of hosts will provide for all peoples a feast of rich food and choice wines" (Isaiah 25:6).

Once Jesus concluded a dialogue with this pointed remark: "People will come from the east and the west, from the north and the south and will take their place at the feast in the kingdom of God" (Luke 13:29).

So, what Jesus did had a sym-

bolic value far surpassing his actions. Eating and drinking with outcasts indicated that God's reign was open to all who accepted his offer of salvation.

If Jesus had shared a meal with the rejects of society just once or twice, it might have caused little more than a raised eyebrow here and there. But he did it often, and purposefully. Someone said that in Luke's Gospel Jesus always seems to be eating.

Jesus taught by actions as well as by words. He could do so because of the symbolic meaning of his deeds.

The miracles were not just extraordinary acts of compassion for unfortunate people. The miracles also were signs that in Jesus the reign of God — his triumph over all evil — was at work.

In John's Gospel, Jesus' actions

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NC News S

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