

Flowing, living waters

By Katharine Bird
NC News Service

Some time ago Father Richard Vosko visited a Texas church. In this warm climate, the baptismal font was placed on the porch of the church, immediately outside its main entrance.

The large font of flowing water was octagonal, a shape traditionally used to recall that the Lord rose on what the early Christians called the eighth day — the new day, the priest explained.

As people enter the church to worship, Father Vosko said, they pass the font "and are given an opportunity to experience living water — to touch it, hear it, see it." As Christians bless themselves with the water, they can recall that everyone enters the church through the living waters of baptism.

Father Vosko considers that baptismal font a "powerful symbol," a stunning example of how liturgical symbols work.

This priest of the Diocese of Albany, N.Y., is a liturgist and a student of the ways "architectural spaces affect people's behavior." He explained that he prefers to have the baptismal font located at a church's main entrance, in the classic position found in the early church.

For the water symbolism to speak loudly to people, he prefers a "font of flowing, living water." Symbols in the church's worship "speak to people by putting them

in touch with deeper truths," he explained.

These symbols help Christians to "grasp the overtones of the mystery of God's presence in our lives," said Father William Bausch, pastor of St. Mary's Church in Colts Neck, N.J.

But, he added, the church has no monopoly on symbols. They are used widely throughout society.

Some of these — like the trademarks identified with certain corporations — are "manufactured symbols," popularized to advertise products, he said. These symbols help people to instantly identify a particular corporation.

Then there are natural symbols such as flowers. "These symbols are very ordinary, very acceptable, very life-giving" for people who receive them on birthdays and anniversaries, Father Bausch said.

Natural symbols, like liturgical symbols, operate on several different levels. Symbols are "multilevel signs of deep realities," Father Bausch said. "Reality is so rich it can't be caught in one word or symbol."

A valentine, for example, "says more than the word love," Father Bausch said. Yet it conveys instantly how one person feels about another.

Sacramental symbols build on natural symbols, according to both priests.

"Water is a good liturgical symbol," Father Vosko said, "because it's a good natural symbol." But, he cautioned, water stands for two opposing realities. Water nourishes and freshens. But torrential waters can destroy.

That's why water works so well as a symbol for what is happening in baptism. "Dipping persons into water puts them in touch with death; and baptism is dying with Christ and rising again," Father Vosko observed.

The Albany priest also thinks the way baptism is celebrated makes a difference in how well its symbols are understood. He is a strong proponent, where possible, of returning to the common practice of the early church where most baptisms were by immersion or submersion.

Father Bausch commented that water naturally "speaks to us of the mystery of chaos, death and cleansing." In baptism, Christians "relate these experiences to Christ."

"Water in baptism speaks of God operating in our lives and gives a clue as to how and why" God does so, he said.

(Ms. Bird is associate editor of Faith Today.)

FOOD...

...for thought

Picture, if you will, the speaker who finds his subject matter exciting and stimulating. When he addresses a group, he gestures frequently with his arms, changes his facial expressions and moves about on the podium.

His gestures, expressions and movements help to get his message across.

Now picture a speaker with a rich message delivered in an unwavering monotone. He stands still at the podium, expressionless. Is there a sense in which his words, by the manner in which they are delivered, mask the full meaning of his rich subject matter?

People communicate with much more than words. The richer the reality they hope to communicate, the more they rely on all the forms of communication available.

So it is little wonder that when it comes to church worship, the use of symbols abounds. For in worship, the reality at hand is very rich. Could it be conveyed through words alone?

Some people who are suspicious of symbols might wonder whether the use of symbolism does more to obscure than to clarify reality. Do symbols get in the way of clear communication? That certainly is not

the intent. Symbols are intended to point toward realities so large that ordinary forms of human communication cannot pin them down.

And it isn't only in matters that involve God directly that symbolism comes into play. Many realities are so large that ordinary human communication does not express them fully: the love between two people, for example, or human hope.

The use of symbolism is much more common in everyday life than it is sometimes thought to be.

—There is the gift to a friend, expressing one's feelings and attitudes about the friendship.

—There is the warm handshake that speaks as loudly as words.

—There are the refreshments served when guests arrive, expressions of welcome.

Symbolism is natural to our attempts at communication not only because of what it helps us to express, but because it takes into consideration the various ways people hear. For people "hear" — they receive a communication — not only with their ears, but with their eyes, their emotions, their imaginations, their memories.

Through the use of symbols in worship, you might say that the church is only doing what comes naturally.

...for discussion

1. In Joe Michael Feist's article, what is the deeper meaning behind the congregation's action of embracing the woman during the sign of peace?

2. What does it mean to say that liturgical symbols build on natural symbols, as several writers suggest this week?

3. According to liturgist Father Richard Vosko in Katharine Bird's article, the sacrament of baptism takes the natural symbol of water and uses it to hint at what is happening on a spiritual level. What does this symbol say to you on a natural level? How does its meaning get transformed on a spiritual level?

4. Why does Father John Castelot say Jesus taught by action as well as by words?

SECOND HELPINGS

"A New Look at the Sacraments," by Father William Bausch. For too many Christians the sacraments are like "crushed roses in an old book," writes Father Bausch, pastor of St. Mary's Church at Colts Neck, N.J. "We admire them, but really don't know who put them there, why they are at this particular page." Shared experiences "are at the heart of symbol meaning. They must be built up layer by layer," the pastor writes. And, "for any symbol to acquire a deep meaning, it has to be around for a while. It has to be honed and deepened by human experience." Father Bausch observes that the biblical overtones of sacramental symbols are truly staggering. And one way of renewing our appreciation of what the sacraments are about is by becoming thoroughly familiar with biblical writings, he says. (Twenty-Third Publications, Box 180, Mystic, Conn. 06355. 1984. \$5.95.)

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are not called miracles or powerful deeds, but "signs." Each had symbolic value. Each was the sign of a deeper reality.

After the wedding feast at Cana, we read: "Jesus performed the first of his signs at Cana in Galilee. Thus did he reveal his glory and his disciples believed in him" (John 2:11).

And the Gospel states: "Jesus performed many other signs as well — signs not recorded here. But these have been recorded to help you believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God" (John 20:30-31).

Symbols play an important part in life, more important than we may realize. They have a power that mere words cannot match.

(Father Castelot teaches at St. John's Seminary, Plymouth, Mich.)