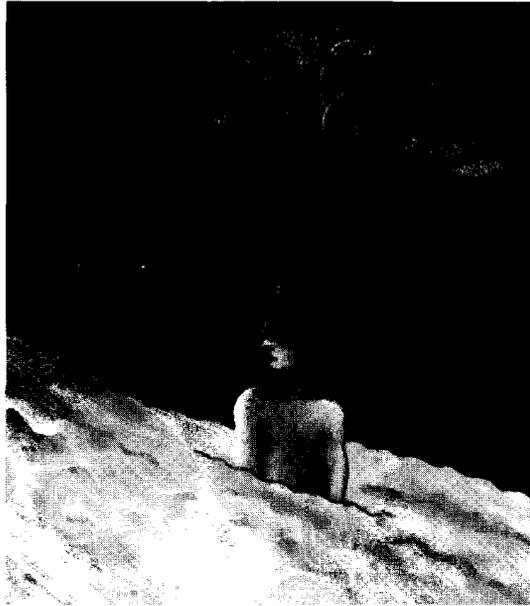


Sacraments of Death

by Harold O.J. Brown



Anna Mycek-Wodecki

Among the sacraments of the Christian churches, the one most frequently received is the Lord's Supper, also known as the Eucharist or Holy Communion. In the classic English-language liturgy of the *Book of Common Prayer*, the ministrant offering the consecrated bread will say, "The Body of the Lord Jesus Christ, broken for thee, preserve thy body and soul unto everlasting life." Thus the sacrament at one and the same time evokes the memory of the death of Jesus and looks forward to the resurrection life of the believer who is joined to Christ by faith.

The tie between death and life is also present in baptism, which unlike the Lord's Supper, is a once-for-all event: going down into the water symbolizes the death of the "old man," dying to self and to sin, and the emergence from the water the rising to a renewed life, which begins here on earth and is fulfilled in the Resurrection. (It is true that the symbolism is rather weakened by the widespread practice of baptism by effusion, in which a small amount of water is poured or sprinkled, but even those churches that do not regularly immerse teach that baptism implies both death and renewal.) George H. Williams, Hollis Professor of Divinity emeritus at Harvard, used to point out how different Christian fellowships find different ways to meet the same spiritual needs. Adults who come to faith in Christ need a symbolic experience of initiation and acceptance into the company of believers, and adult baptism, usually by immersion, clearly provides such an experience. When such believers have children, however, there is naturally a desire to have their children incorporated into the "family of God," even though they are not mature enough for believer's baptism. For those in the great liturgical traditions—Roman Catholics, East-

ern Orthodox, Lutheran, Anglican, Reformed, among others—this is done by infant baptism, a practice rejected by the Baptist traditions that hold that baptism must follow, not precede, a personal confession of faith, and for this reason do not baptize immature children. Such "baptistic" parents nevertheless have a natural desire to bring their children into the Christian family, and therefore infant dedication—which one might call a kind of "waterless baptism"—is practiced.

For those who do baptize infants, a different spiritual and psychological problem arises. The person baptized as a baby has no experience of making a formally recognized and sealed personal decision or a mature commitment to Christ. To fill this need, confirmation is introduced. Many people "come forward" or "make a decision for Christ," either at a public meeting or in private. Some of these, although they may have already been baptized as children, follow up their experience of personal commitment with a second, adult baptism, even if, unlike the Baptist-inclined fellowships, they do not deny that infant baptism is actually baptism.

Other often unnoticed parallels between seemingly rather different practices of different branches of the Christian family reveal the fact that all those who accept Christ and intend to trust Him as their "only hope"—to use the words of the Heidelberg Catechism—have similar concerns and emotional needs that have to be addressed. In consequence, the various branches develop prayers, ceremonies, ordinances, and usages, some based clearly on the Bible, others less clearly so, in order to address those concerns and to meet those needs.

For one and a half millennia, the Christian churches have provided a universe of meaning for the people of Europe, and later of the Americas. Even those who were not thoughtfully and consciously committed to the faith found the great events and phases of life embraced and set into a framework of meaning and ultimate significance by the rites of the church and the seasons of the year. The rhythm of work and repose was cele-

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brated, even to an extent enforced by Sunday closings—now all but abolished in the United States and beginning to be abandoned in Europe. Christmas, celebrating the birth of the Son of God, reminded all adults and children of the wonder of human birth and at the same time alluded to the fulfillment of our deepest hopes in the second coming: “Joy to the World, the Lord is come!” The short-lived celebration of Palm Sunday reminds one of the fickleness of celebrity, before the sad events of Holy Week, when the darkness of Good Friday and the cold silence of the tomb remind believers not only of the death of Jesus but also of their own: “*Du gingest, Jesus, uns voran, durch Leiden himmelan, Und fuhrest jeden, der da glaubt, mit dir die gleiche Bahn.*” (“You went on, Jesus, ahead of us, through suffering to heaven, and lead each one who believes the same road with you.”)

Then the glorious Easter morn reminds all—not only those who seriously and earnestly believe the message—that death and the grave are not the real and final goal of human life. Even the absurd and sometimes atrocious degeneration of the ceremonies and symbolism of Easter into egg hunts and Easter bunnies echoes the message of Resurrection hope, although faintly and unintelligibly.

With the increasingly rapid, increasingly aggressive secularization of life in the United States, the familiar rhythms and seasons are disappearing. When “Christmas Vacation” becomes “Winter Holiday,” the reference-point in divine promise and fulfillment is lost, and people are left with nothing more than the turning of pages or the hanging of a new calendar to mark the great movements of life. The three ceremonies in which virtually all Americans, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, participated, marking birth (baptism, dedication, circumcision), marriage, and death, sometimes augmented by a certain coming of age rite, such as Bar Mitzvah, confirmation, “joining the church,” or being baptized as a teenager or adult, are no longer shared experiences common to the entire culture, but are losing their solemn sacred significance.

One-third of the babies born in the United States last year were born to unmarried mothers; marriage, the primary, solemn covenant undertaking of two humans before God, is being neglected by many, while others seek to transform the “honorable estate, established by God” into a state-sanctioned arrangement available to two members of the same sex as readily as to traditional heterosexual couples. Divorce has become so common that some of the trendier religious groups have introduced religious ceremonies for it.

Where marriage—the covenant between a man and a woman—is falling into oblivion, it is self-evident that there will be less infant baptism and dedication. Ceremonies seeking to claim God’s covenant promises for a child make little sense to parents, or a single parent, for whom the marriage covenant is unimportant. What then are we to expect at the other end of life, when the thread of life weakens and the approach of death becomes insistent?

Traditionally, Christians have sought to accompany the dying with words and acts intended to remind them and reassure them that the God to whom they belonged and whom they served in life will not abandon them in death, but will bring them through that dark portal into the Father’s house. Indeed, so gracious are the promises of God that even those who have not believed and served will be given the chance to turn at the end and to receive the words and signs that promise God’s ac-

ceptance. After death, the Christian funeral is intended to comfort the living and to encourage them so to believe and live that in due course they may “meet on that opposite shore.”

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Of course, Christian sacraments, anointings, prayers, and ultimately funerals—aside from the rare deathbed conversion—are at best meaningless, at worst mocking for those who have lived their lives apart from God and his people. Nevertheless, all or almost all people are overtaken by apprehension, anxiety, even dread at the approach of death. Death confronts the Christian with the prospect of entering the presence of the holy God, a “mysterium tremendum” that cannot be contemplated totally without apprehension. This is a situation in which “ghostly comfort”—the archaic term for the consolations of the faith—is indeed welcome. In our increasingly irreligious culture—the late Pitirim Sorokin characterized it as being in its late, degenerate, sensate phase—the consolations of religion are still available and offered to those who desire them. Unfortunately, in this late sensate culture, the number of those who know enough to ask for them is small, and the number who actually place confidence in them is even smaller.

Where the spiritual sacraments that accompanied and solemnized the mysteries of birth and marriage and even of coming of age fall into disuse and disdain, society develops secular counterfeits to meet normal human emotional and sentimental needs, or, if they cannot actually be met, to put something altogether different in their place. How much greater the need must be when people come up against the apparently absolute limit, death. Even for the believer, death and the prospect of judgment will naturally produce at least some stirrings of dread. When there is no one to say what if anything awaits one on the other side of the line, whether it is an awful Judge, a Savior, or the abyss of nonbeing, nothing is more natural than to seek to surround this mystery with institutions and symbols that at least obscure its frightening dimensions if they cannot transform them.

The desire to obscure the frightening aspect of death is clearly seen in the current fascination with death and dying, stimulated in this country by the work of the Swiss-born physician Dr. Elisabeth Kübler-Ross. It is expressed in words like this: “Dying is as natural a part of life as being born.” The courageous words of an archbishop upon hearing that he has only a few months to live, “Death is a friend,” are taken out of the context in which he spoke them and made to extol death. For Cardinal Bernardin, because of his faith in Christ, death is the doorway to eternal life. Taken out of context, “Death is a

friend” is some sort of a sentimental beautification of what is in reality an ordeal.

It is worth remembering that in the Christian story, even Jesus himself prayed, “If it be possible, let this cup pass from me” (Matthew 26:39). Even the Apostle Paul, who wrote, “To die is gain . . . and to be with Christ, which is far better [than continuing in life]” (Philippians 1:21, 23), called death “The last enemy that shall be destroyed” (I Corinthians 15:26).

Turning death into “as natural a part of life as birth,” and calling it “a friend” without reference to salvation and eternal life, is only the mildest expression of the new thanatophilia, which is making death the goal and the greatest achievement of godless secular man. Does it seem strange to call death—which actually not one of us can evade—an achievement, a “constitutional right”? It may be strange, but it is the hidden reality of a society that regards it as “a triumph of the human spirit” (Lawrence Lader’s expression) to bring about the death of one-third of each new generation before birth.

In an earlier day, death was accompanied by spiritual and sacramental ministries, but they served life, not death. The priest or minister came to the bedside—if need be, to the scaffold. He could not avert death, but he did not embrace it. His task was to help the dying person get through “Jordan’s water, chilly and cold,” not to drown him in it. In the middle of the 20th century, people began to note the way in which medicine was supplanting religion at the bedside. In those years, however, the physicians at first fought death, then, when it became inevitable, tried to make its final throes easier to endure. They had not yet learned, as more and more are doing today, to add to the healing arts a kind of ministry to death.

The medicalization of capital punishment should have given us a clue to what was coming. Earlier in the century, the traditional American method of hanging was found too brutal and, above all, unscientific—new, more complicated methods,

the electric chair and the gas chamber, were introduced. The “assistance” of a physician was necessary only to confirm the obvious, the death of the victim. In the last quarter of the century, the revulsion against capital punishment as the taking of human life was reinforced by the apparent mechanical cruelty of the method, and an ominous solution was found: bring in the physicians, and medicalize death. Lethal injection has become the “treatment of choice” for condemned criminals in many states, and the outcry against capital punishment has diminished.

Lethal injection—the sacrament of Dr. Jack Kevorkian, the high priest of physician-assisted suicide—is becoming the treatment of choice for the dying; indeed, not only for the dying, but for the chronically ill, the severely handicapped, even the depressed and disconsolate. The fact that the same means of dispatch is applied, after seemingly endless appeals and delays, to the convicted murderer, and without much discussion or delay to the innocent but severely ill patient, surely tells us something significant about our society. There is no longer any real distinction between good and evil. One man “merits” his lethal injection by multiple murders, the other simply by being old, in pain, and a drain on society.

Corruptio optimi pessimum est, the Latin proverb has it: the corruption of the best is the worst. The sacraments of the Christian religion, properly understood, form a kind of symbolic bridge between the beginnings of mortal life here on earth, over the dark valley of the shadow of death, into the life that has no end. When the strength of the faith ebbs, as it has been doing for so many decades, the sacramental idea remains, but it is converted into a hollow counterfeit. Sacraments no longer symbolize the promise of God to preserve thy body and soul unto life, but simply mark the end of a road, “No Exit,” as Jean-Paul Sartre wrote.



Bradford Pear Trees

by John Nixon, Jr.

Not Burbank but Seurat, I think, designed
These trees—one carefully placed dot of green
For each incredibly neat leaf—the whole,
Building to perfect cones. A nonsurprise
Would be a small impressionistic bird,
A winged dot, weaving a dotted nest
High in the symmetry. Or, better still,
A female stroller, elegant in dots
From spats to bustle then to parasol,
Might pause here in the shade, allow some tall
Young gentleman to tip his dotted hat.