

Do I really believe that sprinkling a little water on my head is something which decides my existence – or that anointing with oil in Confirmation makes any real difference in my life?

Surely life is always open, and grows by making personal choices and decisions, and not because of one single religious event? Why do I have to go to Church to find God? Have we not outgrown the times of religious ritual, relics of a more primitive past, or is there something much deeper here?

Start with 2 questions: what is a sacrament, and what is human life? Human history shows that there were and are primitive sacraments present whenever there has been any kind of human society – human beings living together; and this has continued with many modifications, right up to today.

They tend to centre on events like birth, death, maturity, sexual genitality – all these appear to have more to do with our biological living rather than with anything spiritual... yet all of them are experienced within the limits of birth and death, even though the actual experiencing says to us that such things should not end.

Are there any hints in life, any instincts that there could be something beyond having simply to die? What is happening is that because I am within this biological reality we call living – and the end of living is dying – I can't get any answers. I have an instinct that there should be something more – but where is it?

Because human beings are not simply biological – we are also spiritual beings – we must avoid trying to respond to spiritual questions – like life is meant for more life not ending in death [this is anguish and pain of bereavement] – with biological answers.

Our food is different from animal food. Eating takes on a different character when we take food. Eating means experiencing the tastefulness of things, being nourished by the fruitfulness of the earth. It means experiencing and enjoying the company of others. Eating is perfect when done along with others; eating creates community. Indeed, when we want to celebrate the high points of our lives – we gather for special meals. The meal interprets life.

First – eating reminds me that I am not self-sufficient, I live by receiving. I am a being who lives from a generosity that always seems to be waiting for me. I realise that my existence is through common union with the world – common union is a clumsy expression for communion. I am supported by things and other people.

Second – I am a spiritual being as well as biological – and both these sit well together, creating the difference e.g. between human and animal eating – as well as so many other values – art, music, love.... The two belong together the body needing the spirit, the spirit needing the body. This co-existence means that we don't simply exist in the world, but we experience the world and everything about it.

As human beings we are meant for communion – meant to be together; and at the same time each person is unique and different from all others. Coming together – communion can only happen when differences are respected; it is unity through difference. This happens e.g. when eating together allows for a deeper experience than simply taking food; when the gift of a flower means more than simply a plant!

It is this experiencing this deeper and necessary level – whether it be sharing music, food, sexuality – which shows us how Sacraments do the same thing. We are talking about symbols rather than signs. A sign simply indicates a direction – it says nothing about what we find there. **H** simply means hospital – doesn't say what kind. Sacraments are not signs – they are symbols – like the giving of a ring, or a rose – much more than an item of jewellery or a flower!

At meal times we do not engage in a soulless biological act of nutrition, but by being uniquely individual we fulfil our need to be with others. Life allows us to learn that things are more than things; they are symbols whose significance is way beyond outward appearances. Food gives us more than it is – enhances family and friendships.

Following from this – Sacrament brings us more than the signs – so that the bread is more than food - real presence; the water poured over us is more than cleaning, it brings a new way of being human; act of forgiveness helps me become a forgiver.

Forgiveness is a crucial part of human development. Go way back as far as human beginnings and discover forms of ritual cleansing and ritual purification universally practised. We are not self-created, but live by the gift of life; and with an inbuilt sense of moral behaviour – i.e. to live decently and respectfully. Failure here leads to guilt – hence the ritualising of cleansing. Guilt is me not being as I should be when experiencing the nearness of God.

Likewise, with leadership – a need for this rises up out of the experience that human community is only real when it does not rely on itself alone, but on one who is greater.

The 7 Sacraments: what distinguishes them sets them apart?

The Church expresses a symbolic concept of the world – which in no way detracts from its reality – but which can't be put under a microscope. There is much more to life than eat, drink, be merry and die... For example – Science sometimes believes that because science has shown us how to do something that it is all right to go ahead and do it.

What about the ought? Where does that fit? When the Church speaks about the soul – it means that we are not just known and loved by God in a different way from other things; but we are known and loved in such a way that we can know and love in response.

Sacraments are ways given to us so that we can actually experience the presence of God as a personal presence. For example – because there is no beginning or ending in God, God never began to love us – we are loved eternally – so, what was God loving before I was born?

My life is the God-given gift to let me find out. And find out I will, if I follow my maker's instructions: To know God as Abba, through Jesus whom he has sent – **the** Sacrament.