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ON THE SYMBOLIC NATURE OF EVANGELIZATION

Steven Drapalik

Abstract - Still often viewed as an action belonging solely to missionary societies, Catholic understanding of evangelization is lacking. Refusal to evangelize is refusal to act as a symbolic reality of Christ in the world, i.e. the Mystical body of Christ - the Church. This paper will demonstrate how evangelization is the primary way in which the Holy Spirit actualizes the Church as symbolic reality of the Mystical body of Christ in the world. When Catholics evangelize, their actions of witness and proclamation constitute participation in a process Louise-Marie Chauvet terms symbolic exchange whereby subjects kenotically give of themselves in order to symbolically manifest Christ. Deeper commitment to evangelization is crucial for the Church as it progresses into the third millennium

Humans have lost a living sense of their nature as symbols. While a symbol (*symbolon*) in its classical sense refers to an outward sign inferring or interpreting some reality, more recent scholarship, particularly that of Karl Rahner, has helped reveal the symbolic as not merely *inferring*, but *actualizing* one reality present within another. In a Christian context, this loss of symbolic nature proves especially detrimental. When everyday parishioners no longer

see themselves as symbols, or more specifically as symbols of Christ, the mission-oriented, evangelistic characteristic of the Church is gradually forgotten. However, as this paper will detail, it is precisely this everyday parishioner, who in virtue of his or her baptism has been called to become the greatest of symbols - the absolute symbol - Christ himself. This realization primarily occurs through an action which has, until just recently, been largely neglected; that of evangelization. This study will illustrate that the indispensable task of evangelization, which is fundamentally symbolic in nature, requires greater emphasis should the Church seek to live in accordance with its constitutive mission. It will moreover demonstrate that it is through a renewed understanding of the symbolic nature of evangelization, an act of *symbolic exchange* comprised of both witness and proclamation, that humans can more fully realize their own symbolic nature and identity, and thus truly become salt and light for a world in need.

Realizing this goal necessitates a recovered theological foundation of symbolic thought concerning human nature. To that end, this paper begins with an examination of the Rahnerian concept of 'symbol' and its implications for human beings. Second, it sets this theological understanding of 'symbol' into an ecclesial context, investigating the Church as the symbolic Body of Christ, particularly in the light of the renewed vision of the Second Vatican Council. Third, this paper will connect symbolic theology to evangelistic practice as it pertains to the mission to which all Christians are called as members of the Church. Lastly, this paper outlines ways in which the Church may respond to this renewed understanding of the symbolic nature of evangelization as it moves into the third millennium.

THEOLOGY OF THE SYMBOL

To establish an effective framework connecting the theological notion of 'symbol' and the work of evangelization, Karl Rahner, in his "The Theology of the Symbol," explicates a deeper understanding of 'symbol' and its implications upon the theological and anthropological nature of man. He begins with the basic principle of an ontology of symbolism that "all beings are by their nature symbolic, because they necessarily 'express' themselves in order to attain their own nature," meaning humans manifest outwardly what constitutes them interiorly to comprehend and appropriate what they are.¹ In so doing, the fundamental premise of man is established as symbolic. Rahner asserts that when most readers utilize the word "symbol" they do so in the sense of *symbolic representation*, as abstract indicators composed of "arbitrary signs, signals, and codes" pointing to a non-present reality, rather than as *symbolic reality*, or "really genuine symbols" in which one reality renders the reality symbolized as ontologically present.² Therefore humans, as naturally symbolic, necessarily express themselves, manifesting themselves as ontologically present in order to attain their own nature as made in the image and likeness of the triune God.

To offer clarity regarding the means of expression, Rahner turns to the Thomist doctrine that "the soul is the substantial form of the body."³ He summarizes, "what we call body is nothing other than the actuality of the soul itself in the 'other' of *materia prima*, the 'otherness' produced by the soul itself, and hence its expression and symbol in the very sense which we have given to the term *symbolic reality*."⁴

Every embodied expression is thus a manifestation of the soul self-actualizing itself into, within, and through the body. Following the axiom that “the part is only understandable in the whole, and the whole in each part,” Rahner anthropologically applies the selfsame principle concluding that the “the soul is fully present in each part of the body” and that the “substantial ‘presence’ of the soul determines and informs each part as part of the *whole*.”⁵ The soul is not some nebulous entity trapped within the carnal self, but is present and actualized within each of the bodily members thereby substantially constituting the unity that is the personal self. It follows that “in every human expression, mimetic, phonetic, etc. in nature, the whole man is somehow present and expressing himself.”⁶ In other words, all actions manifest as substantial expressions of nature individualized within the particular human person. Furthermore, products of culture (speeches, art, music, etc.) are not mere works of a creative individual; they are the very physical expression of the entirety of that individual’s soul made manifest through matter into space exterior to him. This contrast of self to other allows man to live out his symbolic nature and substantially comprehend and give of himself. This self-manifestation takes on monumental importance when viewed through the Christian context of membership in the Church, especially as it relates to the action of evangelization.

THE SYMBOLIC BODY OF CHRIST

In a Christian context, it is critical to note that expressions belong not merely to an individual, but also the ecclesial

Body of Christ – the Church. Too often the Church is mistaken for a mere *symbolic representation* signifying perfected heavenly life, thus overlooking its *symbolic reality* as a plurality of people unified in one heart, mind, and soul substantially manifested and actualized by the divine. Renowned theologian Edward Schillebeeckx in his *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* describes the Church as “an earthly extension of the body of the Lord” used by Christ to make his saving acts visibly present in ‘earthly non-glorified realities’ replacing for man “the invisibility of his bodily life in heaven.”⁷ Due to his perpetual Incarnation, the ascended and glorified Christ continues to save humankind through his on-going external mission from the Trinity. The Church, as the primordial *symbolic reality* of Christ, is the mode by which Christ substantially manifests his divine nature and continues to visibly encounter and redeem humanity.

Through his Passion, Christ “becomes the head of the People of God, the Church assembled in his death.”⁸ Baptism into Christ’s death and resurrection efficaciously initiates one into the *mystici corporis Christi* in which “head and members form as it were one and the same mystical person.”⁹ *Mystici* is here used to emphasize that the Body manifested within the ecclesial body is a supernatural reality, unique to all other conceptions of bodily constitution. Citing Augustine, Schillebeeckx maintains that “Christ dies that the Church might be born.”¹⁰ The Church is itself the redemptive victory achieved by Christ realized in historical form. Not merely a *means* of salvation, it *is* salvation. Schillebeeckx claims that the Church, both as community of the redeemed and redeeming institution, is a

symbol fully containing within itself the redemptive reality of Christ. The whole community of the faithful, hierarchy and laity alike, are themselves the sacramental realization of Christ on earth. Through the saving activities carried out by this whole community, the inward invisible communion in grace with God in Christ is made visibly manifest. By combining the principle outlined earlier by Rahner that the body is the self-actualization of the soul in the 'other' of the *materia prima* with the Church's teaching that the Holy Spirit "is the soul, as it were of the Mystical Body" present "entire in the Head, entire in the Body, and entire in each of the members," one may conclude that the souls of baptized Christians are thus the 'otherness' the Holy Spirit actualizes within as its mode of manifestation.¹¹ Through willingness to evangelize one allows oneself to be actualized by the Holy Spirit as the operative mode by which the perpetuation of the redemption achieved by Christ is actualized.

VATICAN II'S RENEWAL OF EVANGELISTIC THEOLOGY

Although the Council of Trent declared "that the gospel was the source of all saving truth and moral discipline, and was to be preached to every creature (Denzinger 1501)," to differentiate itself from the Reformers, according to Avery Cardinal Dulles the Church "became content to be known as the Church of tradition, law, priesthood, and sacraments, rather than the Church of the word of God," initiating what he termed the "crisis of evangelization."¹² As protection against Enlightenment philosophies of the 17th and 18th cen-

turies and the Modernist shift of the 19th and 20th centuries, the Church increasingly viewed the outside world as a threat to its own relevance and survival. This prompted a shift away from a theology of evangelization and directed attention to internal matters such as catechetical instruction and pastoral care of its own members.¹³ Fortunately, this inward shift would be eventually reversed under the leadership of John XXIII.

It was during his years as nuncio to France, that the soon-to-be pope was first exposed to a new style of kerygmatic theology which arose in the mid-twentieth century thanks to Protestant thinkers such as Karl Barth.¹⁴ This influence became apparent when just three months after his papal election, John XXIII announced his intention to convoke the Second Vatican Council. It was his hope that this “new Pentecost” would result in an *aggiornamento* – a bringing up to date – which would enable the Church to more effectively share Christ with the modern world.¹⁵ Meeting less than a century after the First Vatican Council, this new council sought dialogue with the modern world that it might transform the world and be transformed by it in return. John XXIII expressed that the Church “must ever look to the present, to the new conditions and new forms of life introduced into the modern world, which have opened new avenues to the Catholic apostolate.”¹⁶ Through an openness to the world, and a willingness to evangelize, the Church discovers its own fundamental identity and purpose for existence.

For Paul VI, who succeeded John XXIII, the council’s evangelistic dynamism had made a tremendous impact. In his 1975 Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi*, he asserted that the objectives of the Second Vatican Council “are definitively summed up in this single one: to make the

Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the gospel to the people of the twentieth century.”^{18A} The Gospel is not to be hoarded, but shared for the life of the world. This sharing is so proper to the Church that “evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. She exists in order to evangelize.”^{18B} Evangelization is not merely an identifying feature of the Church, but rather *the* identifying feature which constitutes its nature as *symbolic reality* of the primordial symbol of Christ.¹⁹ All baptized Christians constitute the Mystical Body of Christ and have received the missionary mandate to engage in evangelization. When engagement in witness and proclamation is neglected, the Church loses its sense of identity and mission. For this reason, let us now look more deeply at the symbolic nature of these two constitutive, interrelated actions which together constitute the very purpose of the Church.

EVANGELIZATION AS SYMBOLIC WITNESS

As *Evangelii nuntiandi* explains, “The first means of evangelization is the witness of an authentically Christian life.”²⁰ Witness is thus the primary way in which man renders Christ present. Since all embodied actions are expressions by which the soul self-actualizes itself, the Church as the symbolic Body of Christ manifests the Spirit of Christ through its embodied actions – in *being* Church. By carrying out corporal works of mercy the Church not only exudes the “aroma of Christ” (2 Corinthians 2:15), but truly renders present the reality it symbolizes. Since it was out

of God's great love for creation that He sent His only begotten Son to assume embodiment as "the human incarnation of the redeeming love of God," it must be understood that the impetus to witness is this same self-giving love.²¹ Witness is profoundly kenotic in nature because it imitates Christ who poured Himself out for the life of the world. Since Christ first loved man, it is in loving others through self-giving witness that man renders present Love itself. Through kenotic, embodied expressions the Church as the symbolic Body of Christ not only signifies the God it symbolizes, but actually manifests and perpetuates the kenotic sacrifice of Christ.

Existing as a symbolic plurality within the unity of mankind, man lives out his symbolic nature in direct, loving relationships. Through love, defined by John Paul II in *Evangelium vitae* as "the giving and receiving of the self," the Church seeks call a faithful people into a life of Trinitarian union.²² As *Gaudium et spes* states, when Jesus prayed to the Father, "that all may be one... as we are one" (John 17:21-22), "he implied a certain likeness between the union of the divine Persons, and the unity of God's sons in truth and charity. This likeness reveals that man...cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself."²³ Through kenotic witness, humans created in the *imago Dei* more deeply come to understand themselves as a *symbolic reality*. Through symbolic witness, one not only encounters God present in the lives of others, but one allows God to further transform oneself into His image. It is in this twofold aspect of encounter and transformation that the goal of all our efforts at evangelization are located. When Christians live authentic lives of love and service to others, they find their true unitive, evangelistic, and

ecclesial identity, thus realizing their full nature as symbolic witnesses of Christ.

EVANGELIZATION AS SYMBOLIC PROCLAMATION

For the Church to fully realize its evangelistic identity and mission, all witness must, as John Paul II asserts in *Ecclesia in America*, eventually culminate in a “clear and unequivocal proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ, that is the preaching of his name, his teaching, his life, his promises and the Kingdom which he has gained for us by his Paschal Mystery.”²⁴ In order to fully express its *symbolic reality* as the Mystical Body, the Church must proclaim the nature and identity which impels it to kenotic action. Summarized by Paul VI in *Evangelii nuntiandi*, this proclamation that “in Jesus Christ, the Son of God made man, who died and rose from the dead, salvation is offered to all men, as a gift of God’s grace and mercy” constitutes the very “foundation, center, and at the same time, summit” of evangelization.²⁵ This proclamation is both foundation and summit because the Church is the salvation of which it proclaims.²⁶ According to Rahner, it is through proclamation that man enables “the word which Christ himself speaks in us and through us, the word which is active and effective of what it signifies” to be spoken and thus render present what it proclaims. Through proclamation, God substantially manifests His redemptive grace to those whom we proclaim the Gospel.

It is through this means of proclamation that man works in cooperation with grace, “understood as the uncreated self-communication of God,” whereby he “discloses him-

self and freely imparts himself to another.”²⁷ In sharing the Gospel through explicit speech and testimony, humans not only announce Christ but allows the Holy Spirit to actualize them as *symbolic realities* manifesting Christ and perpetuating his saving sacrifice. Additionally, testimony, as a sharing of the operation of grace in one’s own life, is jointly both proclamation and witness. Through the sharing of one’s own history, failings, and redemption, a person gives of their very self to the other in order to manifest Christ continually present in their life. Thus proclamation and witness are embodied expressions proper to each and every baptized Christian as a fulfillment of their membership within the symbolic Body of Christ. Having considered the symbolic nature of evangelization present in both witness and proclamation, let us now examine how both of these become actualized within the act of *symbolic exchange*.

EVANGELIZATION AS SYMBOLIC EXCHANGE

In his work *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, Louis-Marie Chauvet describes this act of *symbolic exchange* through juxtaposition to market exchange. In market exchange, two or more subjects mutually exchange objects of value for personal gain; in a system of *symbolic exchange* however, this exchange is not merely between subjects, but consists *of* subjects.²⁸ Evangelization as symbolic exchange is comprised of kenotic giving of the subject himself for the sake of another. As Catherine Vincie, Professor of Liturgical and Sacramental Theology at the Aquinas Institute of Theology explains,

it is through *symbolic exchange* that “we constitute ourselves as subjects and create or recreate our relationships with others.”²⁹ In acts of witness and proclamation one freely gives to others according to *symbolic exchange*, because, like the Twelve, they have first received and thus “without cost [they] are to give” (Matthew 10:8). Chauvet, who describes this giving as a “logic of gratuitousness or ‘gift’” emphasizes that this is a ‘necessary gratuitousness’ of an ‘obligatory gift’, and refusal to give or receive “is to place oneself socially and symbolically outside the circuit, to incur excommunication by the group and make it impossible for oneself to live in it as a subject.”³⁰ This is especially true for those who refuse participation in the Church’s evangelistic mission. As *Evangelii nuntiandi* argues, it is “unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn.”³¹ Refusal to evangelize is refusal to be constituted as Church, thereby excommunicating oneself from the Mystical Body to which one claims to belong.

If, according to Chauvet, “daily conversations are nothing but symbolic exchange,” then the Church daily encounters opportunities to engage in *symbolic exchange*.³² This giving, or rather gifting, of itself through evangelization is a mediation of the grace which constitutes itself via relationality to the other. However, this gifting implicates and obligates the receiver to return-gift, since this “return-gift is the mark of the reception.”³³ In daily conversation this return-gift could be quite simple, “if not of a spoken response, at least of a body language that shows listening and attention;” in regards to evangelization,

the proper response is a gift of one's self through repentance, or *metanoia*.³⁴ Repentance is the proper response to evangelization because the nature of the gift is the saving redemption of Christ. When encountered by such an offer, one must either a) accept this grace through faith or b) reject this grace through obstinacy. If the one evangelized is not already initiated into the symbolic Body of Christ, this response culminates in baptism. However, if the one evangelized is already baptized this response culminates in rededication to God through discipleship. By "the very act of exchanging, that is, of recognizing another person as a partner and being recognized by this person" the Church as the symbolic Body of Christ recognizes that "although all men who are born were redeemed by the blood of Christ" they do "not yet participate in those sources of divine grace which exist in the Catholic Church."³⁵ Refusal to engage in evangelization is an implicit denial of Christ's universal redemption. If the Church truly affirms that Christ died for all, and that it has a role in perpetuating the effects of this redemption, it must continue to emphasize the importance of evangelization.

EVANGELIZATION IN THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

This renewal of evangelistic mission is helping to realize the fruits of the Second Vatican Council in the contemporary era. Influenced by *Evangelii nuntiandi*, John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis have all taken up this renewed call to evangelize. In echoing *Lumen gentium* §36 by proclaiming "open wide the doors for Christ," John Paul II set the course for the Church of the third millennium, inspiring the

formation of countless lay ecclesial movements devoted to the “New Evangelization”, or a re-evangelization of those already baptized yet not currently enjoying the fullness of life which stems from active faith.³⁶ In 2012, Benedict XVI convened a Synod of Bishops on the theme of “The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith,” which recognized the teachings of the Second Vatican Council as “a vital instrument for transmitting the faith in the context of the New Evangelization,” asserting that evangelization “is a complex process which involves the faith and life of every Christian.”³⁷ Francis too has dedicated much of his pontificate to encouraging evangelization. In *Evangelii gaudium*, he describes the Church as “an evangelizing community” which by getting “involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives,” takes on “the smell of the sheep, and the sheep are willing to hear their voice.”³⁸ In sharing the Gospel, believers should be so intermingled in the world that they should even take on its aroma. Only by dropping suspicions of the world and engaging others in evangelization will the Church become a community properly identifiable as the symbolic Body of Christ.

CONCLUSION

Although the Church has greatly renewed its focus upon its missionary mandate, unfortunately *evangelization* “is still often more a slogan or a ‘flavor’ than a regular part of the baptized Catholic’s way of life.”³⁹ Rather than a ‘flavor’ it should be seen as the very essence of the Church’s nature. Failure to evangelize is failure to symbolically be

Christ; since in refusing to love, one refuses Love itself. Without acceptance of this evangelistic task, individual Christians will never fully realize the depth of who they are in Christ. It is dearly hoped that with this renewed insight, Christians may once again rise to zealously proclaim and witness to their faith, rendering Christ symbolically present wherever they go.

Notes:

¹ Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," in *Theological Investigations: Volume IV* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1966), 224.

² *Ibid.*, 225.

³ *ST I*, Q 76, A 1, c.o.

⁴ Rahner, "Theology of the Symbol," 247.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 248.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (Franklin, WI: Sheed & Ward, 1999), 43.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd ed., 795.

¹⁰ Augustine, *In Evangelium Johannis*, tr. 9, 10 (*PL*, 35, 1463).

¹¹ Pius XII, *Mystici corporis Christi* (Encyclical on the Mystical Body of Christ), June 29, 1943, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_29061943_mystici-corporis-christi_en.html (accessed May 10, 2014), 57.

¹² Avery Dulles, *Evangelization for the Third Millennium* (New York: Paulist Press, 2009), 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁵ Ralph Martin, *Will Many Be Saved?: What Vatican II Actually Teaches and its Implications for the New Evangelization* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2012), 1.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

^{18A} Paul VI, *Evangelii nuntiandi* (Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelization in the Modern World), December 8, 1975, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi_en.html (accessed May 10, 2014), 2. *Nota bene* - for note ^{18B} cf. *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 14.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 41.

²¹ Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 14.

²² John Paul II, *Evangelium vitae* (Encyclical on the Value and Inviolability of Human Life), March 25, 1995, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_25031995_evangelium-vitae_en.html (accessed May 10, 2014), 81.; Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament*, 13.

²³ Second Vatican Council, *Gaudium et spes* (Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World), December 7, 1965, http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19651207_gaudium-et-spes_en.html (accessed May 10, 2014), 24.

²⁴ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in America* (Apostolic Exhortation on the Encounter with the Living Jesus Christ: the Way to Conversion, Communion and Solidarity in America), January 22, 1999, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_22011999_ecclesia-in-america_en.html (accessed May 10, 2014), 246.

²⁵ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 27.

²⁶ Karl Rahner, “The Word and the Eucharist,” in *Theological Investigations: Volume IV* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd, 1966.), 254.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 256.

²⁸ Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 119.

²⁹ Catherine Vincie, *Celebrating Divine Mystery: A Primer in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 127.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 118.

³¹ *Evangelii nuntiandi*, 24.

³² Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 122.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*

³⁵ John XXIII, *Gaudet Mater Ecclesia* (Opening Address of Vatican II), October 11, 1962, <http://conciliaria.com/2012/10/mother-church-rejoices-opening-address-of-john-xxiii-at-the-council/> (accessed April 15, 2014).

³⁶ John Paul II, Homily of His Holiness John Paul II for the Inauguration of his Pontificate, October 22, 1978, http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/homilies/1978/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_19781022_inizio-pontificato_en.html (accessed April 15, 2014), 5.

³⁷ Holy See Press Office, *Synodus Episcoporum Bulletin*, XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith, http://www.vatican.va/news_services/press/sinodo/documents/bollettino_25_xiii-ordinaria-2012/02_inglese/b33_02.html (accessed April 17, 2014).

³⁸ *Evangelii gaudium*, 24.

³⁹ Martin, *Will Many Be Saved*, 4-5.