

Signs and Symbols

Simple elements made sacred



TARGET AUDIENCE

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Overview

This Object deals with the signs and symbols used in the Church's liturgy. Most of these elements can be found in our daily lives. Through the liturgy we are invited to reflect on our faith through these everyday norms.

The multimedia element is a graphic depiction of the signs and symbols used. Each item is accompanied by a short explanatory text.

Teacher Background

Teachers are encouraged to review the 'Crafting the Art of Liturgy' section of the DVD Rom *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* to deepen their understanding of the art, beauty and celebration as well as the roles of the ordained ministry and of the liturgical assembly.

In particular, the following aspects of *Become One Body One Spirit in Christ* provide entry points and context for this Learning Object:

- Within the pathway 'Liturgy as Art' watch the video 'Rediscovering the Art of'. The content of the video is developed further in the excerpts taken from the essay *Presidential Prayers and Practice: Towards An Ars Celebrandi* by Canon Alan Griffiths. The excerpts can be accessed by clicking on the 'Read More' arrow, or else you can download the essay by clicking on the 'View Essay' button.

Where appropriate, use this material with the students.

Supporting Content

This text supports the focus of the multimedia element.

The signs and symbols used in the Church's liturgy provide us with a great opportunity for reflection. Most of them are also found in our own homes: oil, bread, light, water, wine, and white clothing. They are simple, basic and very accessible to us. These simple elements of everyday life invite us to reflect on the mystery of our faith.

We need symbols that speak to us of the sacred. In our present age we are confronted with so many flashing images and shrill sounds competing for our

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Supporting Content

attention that we can end up feeling fragmented, because we have no time to reflect or to be still. We sometimes long for peace and a sense of calm.

One way to promote inner peace is to contemplate the meaning of a symbol, such as a flame or a simple bowl of clear water. A symbol is a little like a 'window' to God. It gives a glimpse into the mystery of the divine at the heart of life.

In the liturgy and in all sacraments simple elements from life are brought forward and made sacred. Light, water, clothing, oil, hands, bread and wine are transformed from ordinary objects into the gift of God's grace and presence with us, and we too are transformed into images of Christ.

The 'language' of Symbols

As a Church we have a 'language' that helps us put expression to the moments of grace that mark our lives. This language is expressed in symbols and rituals (which are beyond words) and also, of course, in words that help us communicate the mystery of our relationship with the Divine. This is the language of the liturgy. Let's look at a few of these symbols:

Laying on of Hands

One of the primary symbols in the liturgy is the 'laying on of hands'. From ancient times, to impose hands on someone or to extend one's hand over the person's head was the sign of calling down the Holy Spirit. **All seven sacraments employ this symbol.** We call the prayer which accompanies the imposition of hands an *epiclesis*, which is an invocation. In the Eucharist, the priest stretches his hands over the bread and wine to call upon the Holy Spirit to consecrate these gifts into the body and blood of Christ.

Bread and Wine

Wheat is grown and ground, transformed by human work to make bread. Grapes are grown and crushed, transformed by human work to make wine. It is traditionally the work of human hands. Bread is life. Wine is joy. The sharing of food and drink is often linked with peace-making and the resolution of differences. From the earliest times, human beings have shared meals together. The very act of eating and drinking together is a symbol of fellowship, common life, common love. In biblical times, people ate everything from the same plate. People ate using flat bread which served as a 'spoon' dipped into the communal dish. Sharing food in this way increased the sense of solidarity and fellowship among those

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eating it. They became, in a sense, *one* body.

The *breaking of the bread* was the ritual gesture that established communion among those at table in a Jewish ritual meal. The Last Supper was such a meal. Jesus identified the broken bread and poured wine with his own Body and Blood, broken and poured out in his suffering and Death. After his Resurrection, Jesus' disciples spoke of recognising him in the 'breaking of the bread'. The 'breaking of the bread' eventually came to describe the whole action of the Eucharist after the time of Jesus.

Fire/Light

In the Old Testament, fire is a symbol of God's purifying presence. In the biblical narratives we read of Moses before the burning bush, intensely aware of the presence of God. We read of the Hebrew people journeying through the desert, led by a pillar of fire by night. In the Bible, transformation is nearly always manifested by light. In the Old Testament, Moses is transfigured. In the New Testament, Jesus is transfigured, shining brighter than the sun. This 'shining' signifies the radiance of God's presence. In the New Testament also, the flames of Pentecost are a symbol of the presence of God transforming the lives of Jesus' disciples.

We too will be transformed. At Baptism we are given a lighted candle to symbolise the light of Christ. This is the transforming light of faith that drives out the darkness of despair. And we are commissioned to keep this light burning brightly throughout our lives.

Oil

For the Jewish people, our ancestors in faith, anointing with oil meant setting the person apart for a particular mission. Just as royalty and Priests are anointed for a particular mission, so are we as Christians given a particular mission to *be* Christ in the world today. The word Christ means the *Anointed*. We call ourselves Christians because we are anointed in Baptism. We are the community anointed to continue the work of Christ, the anointed one.

White Garment

The newly baptised are clothed in white as a symbol of 'putting on' Christ, and the pure new life of grace. White is the colour of Christian baptism. It symbolises the cleansing of the person from all sin. The earliest Christians wore white to signify their union with Christ and their commitment to living a virtuous life. At Mass, the Priest wears a white alb which represents his baptismal garment.

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For Reflection and Discussion: Ideas for Use

Select one or more of the following activities for students to complete.

- 1 **To assist students in completing this task ensure they have access to the relevant liturgical books.**

All seven sacraments employ the symbol of the *epiclesis*, or 'laying on of hands'. The word *epiclesis* means 'invocation' or 'calling down from on high'. Explore the liturgical rites and identify the moment when this happens in each of the sacraments. Describe, in your own words, the power and meaning of this gesture.

- 2 **To assist students in completing this task ensure they have access to a computer to conduct online research.**

There are three holy oils used in catholic sacraments:

1. the oil of catechumens,
2. the oil of chrism
3. the oil of the sick.

Explore the sacramental purpose for each of these oils. Identify the times in your own faith journey when you have been anointed or when someone close to you was anointed? Which oil was used and why?

- 3 **Read the two scripture passages mentioned in the question. If you have the facilities to do so, project the texts on to the board and complete the exercise as a class.**

Compare and contrast the Scripture passages of Moses' shining face (Exodus 34: 29–35) and Jesus' transfiguration (Matthew 17: 1–8). Why do you think the presence of God is described in terms of brilliant light?

- 4 **To assist students in completing this task ensure they have access to a computer to conduct online research.**

How is light used in Baptism? During the baptismal ceremony, what are the words that accompany the receiving of the light? Also identify the words prayed as the white garment is placed on the newly baptised person. How do these prayers describe the mission given to the new Christian? How can Christians live that mission in today's world? How do you live yours?

- 5 **Invite the students to contemplate the sacrament of Eucharist and to then write a personal reflection.**

Write a short reflection in which you bring your life, your work, your hopes and dreams to the Eucharist in order to be changed and blessed by Christ.

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Teacher Professional Development Resources

[Signs and Symbols of the Catholic Faith](#) – a presentation

[Catholic Symbols](#)