

Sacraments of Life Life of the Sacraments

Story
Theology



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My Father's Cigarette Butt as Sacrament

There is a little treasure buried back in a drawer. It is a little flask with a cigarette butt in it. This little butt is made of straw and the yellowish tobacco people are wont to smoke in southern Brazil. Nothing new about all that. But this insignificant cigarette butt has a unique history. It speaks to my heart and evokes endless nostalgia and longing.

On August 11, 1965, I was in Munich, West Germany. I remember the day well. Outside, the houses were welcoming the strong sun of a European summer. Multicolored flowers were blossoming in the parks or fluttering gaily from windows. It was 2:00 P.M. The mailman brought me my first letter from home. It was fraught with the nostalgia of the journey it had made. I opened it hastily. Everyone at home had written. It almost seemed to be a newspaper or journal. It had an air of mystery.

You should already be in Munich when you read these lines. Though different from all the other letters, this letter, too, brings you a beautiful message. Seen from the standpoint of faith, the news it brings you is truly good news. A few days ago, God asked a tribute of love, faith, and serious thanksgiving from us. He came down into the midst of our family, looked around at each one of us, and chose for himself the most perfect and most mature one of us, the holiest and the best: our beloved papa. Dear Leonardo, God did not take him away from us; he left him

with us even more. He did not snatch papa away from the joy of our holidays; he planted him even more deeply in the memory of us all. God did not steal papa away from our presence; he left him even more present with us. He did not take him; he left him with us. Papa did not go away; he came to us. Papa did not go; he came so that he would be papa even more, so that papa would be present now and always with all of us here in Brazil, with you in West Germany, with Ruy and Clodovis in Louvain, and with Waldemar in the United States.

The letter continued with the testimony of each child. The death that had taken up its place in the living heart of a fifty-four year old man was celebrated as a sister, as a communion feast uniting a family dispersed in three different countries. A profound serenity bubbled up amid the turbulent tears.

Faith illuminates and exorcises the absurdity of death. Death is the true birthday (*dies natalis*) of the human being. And so, in the catacombs of the old monastery, in the presence of so many living figures from the past—from William of Ockham to the humble infirmarian who had just been born to God a few days ago, on three successive days I celebrated the holy Mass of Christmas for the man who, far away in his true homeland, was already celebrating his final and definitive birthday. How the ancient texts took on a strange profundity: “*puer natus est nobis . . .*”

The next day, in the envelope that had brought me the news of a death, I noticed a sign of the life of the man who had given life to us in every sense of the word. It was a yellowed cigarette butt, the last he had smoked moments before coronary thrombosis liberated him once and for all from this weary existence. The deeply feminine and sacramental intuition of a sister had prompted her to include the cigarette butt in the envelope.

From that point on, the cigarette butt ceased to be a cigarette butt. It became a sacrament and remained one. It is alive and speaks of life. It accompanies life. Its typical color, its strong smell, and its burnt end mean it is still lit in my life. So it is of

inestimable value. It belongs to the heart of life and the life of the heart. It recalls and renders present the figure of papa who, with the passage of years, had already become a family archetype and a touchstone for the fundamental values of all his children. "From his lips we have heard, from his life we have learned: one who does not live to serve is of no use for living." That is the epitaph we placed on his tombstone.

The Sacramental Function

Whenever a reality of this world, without leaving the world, evokes another, different reality, it takes on a sacramental function. It ceases to be a thing and becomes a sign or symbol. Every sign is a sign of some thing or some value for someone. As a thing, it may be absolutely irrelevant. As a sign, it can take on precious and priceless value. Thus, as a thing, the straw cigarette gets thrown into the garbage; but as a symbol, it is preserved as a priceless treasure.

What makes something a sacrament? As we have already seen in describing my family mug as a sacrament, it is the inner human view of things that transmutes them into sacraments. It is living familiarly and intimately with things that creates and re-creates them symbolically. It is the time we spend with them, the taming of them, the insertion of them into our own experience that humanizes them and makes them speak the language of human beings. Sacraments reveal a way of thinking that is typically human. There is a real sacramental way of thinking, just as there is a scientific way of thinking. At the first stage of sacramental thinking, everything is seen *sub specie humanitatis*.

Everything reveals the human being: its successful or unsuccessful experiences, that is, its encounter with the manifold manifestations of the world. In this encounter human beings do not approach the world from a neutral standpoint. They form judgments, discover values, make interpretations. Familiarity

with the world means that human beings create their own habitations, which is the little parcel of the domesticated world in which each thing has its own name and place. There things are not simply made sport of. They share in the human order, become familiar things, reveal what the human being is and how it is that. They speak of the inhabitant and draw his or her portrait.

The more deeply human beings relate to the world and to the things of *their own* world, the more clearly sacramentality shows up. Then there emerge the native homeland that is more than the geographical boundaries of a country, the place of our birth that is more than a parcel of government land, the native city that is more than the sum of its houses and inhabitants, the parental home that is more than a stone building. In all those things dwell values, good and evil spirits, and the lineaments of a human landscape. Sacramental thinking means that the roads we travel, the mountains we see, the rivers that bathe our lands, the houses that inhabit our neighborhoods, and the persons that create our society, are not simply people, houses, rivers, mountains, and roads like all the others in the world. They are unique and incomparable. They are a part of ourselves. So we rejoice and suffer over their fate. We lament the felling of the huge tree in our town square or the demolition of an old shed. Something of ourselves dies along with them. Why? Because they are no longer merely things. They are sacraments in our life, be it blessed or cursed.

The Sacramental Dimensions of Life

Everything is, or can become, a sacrament. It depends on human beings and the way they look at things. The world will reveal its sacramental nature insofar as human beings look at it humanely, relating to it and letting the world come inside them to become *their* world.

The classical authors tell us that human beings are, in some

way, all things. If that is true, then it is also true that all things can become sacraments for them, so long as human beings open up to all things and welcome them into their human abode. Isn't that the essential vocation of human beings with respect to the world? To humanize it? To make it their dwelling and draw it out of its opacity? And isn't the sacramental way of looking at things the way to go about that vocation? Then the whole world, not just some little parcel of it, would be their friendly and familiar homeland inhabited by fraternity and a tranquility of order reigning over all things.

Who would have said that a cigarette butt could become a sacrament? But there it is in the back of my drawer. Now and then I open the flask. An aroma escapes. The color and texture of a living past take shape. The drawer does not contain the grandeur of the presence created. The mind's eye sees my father alive, rendered present in the cigarette butt: cutting the straw, parceling out the tobacco, igniting the lighter, taking long drags of his cigarette, giving lessons, reading the newspaper, burning his shirts with the sparks, plunging into arduous office work at night, smoking . . . smoking. His last cigarette went out with his own mortal life. But something continues to remain lit, because of the sacrament.

1629 - Cigarette Epiphany