

Signs of the Times: Signs, Symbols, and Meaning in Religious Life

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In the film “Into the Great Silence,” recorded at the Grande Chartreuse in the French Alps, a fascinating sequence takes place. In the segment entitled “Dinner,” the monks are filing into the refectory. But before they enter, they hold their hands under a little running water and then dry them on a roll-towel. Since the day is a feast day, recreation outdoors follows dinner. At the recreation, a conversation takes place. These are the words spoken:

“In Sélignac they have not been washing their hands before the refectory for twenty years now.”

“Do you think we should stop washing our hands?”

“No, but it wouldn’t be a big deal to get rid of something useless.”

“Our entire life, the whole liturgy, and everything ceremonial are symbols.”

“If you tear down the symbols, then you tear down the walls of your own house.”

“In the monastery in Pavia, instead of one wash-basin they have six. There you can wash your hands properly.”

“Yes, they’re also Trappists.”

“When we abolish the signs, we lose our orientation. Instead, we should search for their meaning.”

“But one should unfold the core of the symbols.”

“The signs are not to be questioned, we are.”

“I’m not against hand washing. I just forget to dirty my hands first.”

“The error is not to be found in hand washing, the error is in our mind.”

This dialogue encapsulates the crisis that has plagued religious life for forty years. The crisis concerns signs, symbols, and meaning. The hand washing is a sign, a symbol. Should

the monks abolish the symbol as useless? Is it merely functional, to clean dirty hands? Is there a meaning behind the symbol? Can you preserve the meaning and abolish the symbol?

My reflections on signs, symbols, and meaning in religious life will take the form of ten theses.

1. A sign is a thing known first that leads to knowledge of another thing. Signs may be natural or conventional.

Perhaps in the first class of the treatise on sacraments, we learned about signs: things known first that lead to knowledge of other things. Natural signs communicate knowledge of what they signify by their very nature: inevitably, the example of a natural sign is smoke, which leads to knowledge that there is fire below it. Conventional signs gain their meaning from agreement among the users of the sign: letters of the alphabet are one example, the national flag is another. By its nature, a rectangle of cloth with red and white stripes, and a blue field with white stars in one corner, has no intrinsic meaning; but it has a great deal of meaning for those who agree to that meaning.

2. Symbols are natural signs to which further signification has been added by the one who instituted them.

Symbols stand between natural signs and conventional signs: they are natural signs to which further signification has been added by the one who instituted them. One example of symbols is sacraments: water cleanses, bread and wine nourish; but, by the will of Christ, the water of baptism and the bread and wine of the Eucharist mean much more than simple cleansing or nourishing.

3. Almost from the beginning, religious life has had a set of signs and symbols that express meaning. These signs and symbols communicated their meaning to the religious

themselves, to the other members of the religious community, and to those outside the community.

When I say “almost from the beginning,” I am thinking of the second, third, and fourth centuries. Without undertaking a history of monasticism (and, in the early church, what we call religious life was monasticism), we can say this: the ascetical life¹ existed first, before monasticism. From the second or third century on, there is evidence of “family ascetics”: often enough, women who practiced asceticism but continued to live with their families. Their characteristics were celibacy or virginity, restrained diet, and prayer, all of these understood as a kind of self-offering. These characteristics already functioned as signs. Asceticism became monasticism when the ascetics separated themselves from the rest of the Christian community and lived apart — either as hermits, or in groups of hermits, or in a community. Antony and the many other monks whom we read about in the *Apophthegmata patrum* and so much other literature from the fourth and fifth centuries had much in common: simple dress, restrained diet, extensive prayer, even if the practices were voluntary. These practices were signs or symbols of religious dedication. A significant change began with Pachomius and the monasticism of the upper Nile. One might say that Pachomius made religious life accessible to the mediocre. The primary virtue was no longer ascetical achievement, but obedience. Pachomius’s monks were to live a highly structured life, a life of prayer, work, and reading or instruction. And in cenobitic monasticism the number and importance of signs increased.

¹Asceticism was not a Christian invention; it was known from the pagan world and, to a lesser extent, in the Jewish world.

4. The principal signs of religious life in a community were uniform clothing or the habit,² common residence, common table, similar furnishings, common Mass and prayer, and a horarium or daily order.

The general outline of the monastic life that Pachomius established is fairly well known.³ Each monk had his own cell; cells were in houses of twenty or more monks each. At dawn a gong or horn called the monks to prayer, which consisted of reading from the Scripture and recitation of the Lord's Prayer, with periods of silence. The monks worked with their hands during the prayer. Only on days when the Eucharist was celebrated did they sing or pray psalms. After prayer, the day's work was organized. Work assignments changed each week. Dress was a tunic with a belt, a goatskin and hood over the shoulders, boots, and perhaps a staff. The monks had two meals a day: the main meal during the working period and a lighter meal in the evening. The gong was sounded, and all ate together. The meal consisted of bread and cooked vegetables. After the evening meal, the monks sometimes received the *tragematia*, perhaps a dessert of dried fruit, which they could take to their houses and which was supposed to last for three days. In the evening, there was a period of instruction and prayer, and prayers in each house before the monks retired.

Each of us, I suppose, recognizes some elements of our tradition in that short description of life in a Pachomian monastery. There is, after all, only a finite number of ways to live life in a community. One might argue that the elements of religious life were, from the beginning, simply pragmatic, without any further signification as signs or symbols, as the Carthusian who

²Uniform clothing was not a Christian innovation. In the pagan world, for example, a philosopher was recognized by his dress; and different styles of dress were prescribed for different classes of men in Rome.

³This section is taken, often verbatim, from Philip Rousseau, *Pachomius: The Making of a Community in Fourth-Century Egypt*, The Transformation of the Classical Heritage 6 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

wanted proper hand washing for dirty hands implied. But I would argue the opposite. The monks' simple, uniform dress communicated a message to those who saw it, and also to the monks themselves. A century or so later, the dark cloaks of St. Augustine and his companions would communicate a similar message. The common table, the daily order, the rotating work assignments, all communicated a deeper meaning to the monks themselves: equality, charity, the conviction that this life is the means to an end beyond itself.

5. No one of the signs just mentioned is essential to religious life.

The signs mentioned in the account of Pachomian monasticism recur with consistent regularity throughout the history of religious life. But it is also possible to trace the abandonment of some of these signs as religious life changed. The most noticeable change in religious life, and one that came gradually, was the change from monastic stability and the contemplative life to an apostolic, mobile, and active life. A brief sketch will illustrate this point.

Over the centuries in the West, there was a gradual move from monastic stability to active ministry (a move never taken by Byzantine monasticism, despite St. Basil of Caesarea's preference for some apostolate for his monks). Both religious leaders and secular rulers saw monks, or religious, as a potential work force. Gregory the Great sent Roman monks to England as missionaries. Charlemagne wanted monks to tame the central European wilderness. The Cistercians opened up new territory for settlement. By the sixteenth century, religious were ready to go as missionaries to the newly discovered lands of the western hemisphere and of Africa.

The habit became more stylized, perhaps, with the rise of Benedictine monasteries, and certainly more distinctive and differentiated with the rise of the canons regular in the twelfth century and of the mendicant orders in the thirteenth.

Another, dramatic change took place with the rise of the mendicants: a new style of residence, convents that a religious might move in to and then leave to live in another convent.

Monks had vowed stability, remaining in one monastery for life; the mendicants were men on the move. As the economy of Europe developed and expanded, beginning around the eleventh century, a merchant class arose that was mobile, and new cities were founded. Monasteries were often out in the countryside. In some cases, cities grew up around monasteries; Munich is an example. In more cases, though, the mendicants, with their urban parishes and convents, used their mobility to serve the spiritual needs of the city-dwellers, providing sacramental life, devotions, pious associations, and other forms of spiritual life for the urban population.

In the sixteenth century, the Jesuits made another shift, and one that gave rise to strong objections: namely, the abandonment of choir. The Jesuits also gave up a common habit; they were to wear the dress of good priests of the area.

In times of stress or persecution, as during the French Revolution or the anti-clerical regime in Mexico, religious dress and life in community might be abandoned altogether. Sometimes, too, congregations adopted a form of dress like that of secular people of the time, on the grounds that it gave them increased apostolic effectiveness. Our home parish in New York had a convent of the Parish Visitors of Mary Immaculate, who had adopted a kind of conservative secular dress in the 1920s, and kept it: by the 1950s they looked like 1920s flappers in black, with cloche hats and black dresses.

To reflect on the thesis again: no one sign is essential to religious life. For various reasons — usually either apostolic mobility or apostolic ministry — orders in the past abandoned one or other of the signs of religious life. Sometimes, too, religious had to abandon most of the signs of consecrated life simply to survive.

6. Although religious life had suffered setbacks in the past, the abandonment of signs, beginning around 1965, was unprecedented, both in the extent to which signs were abandoned and in the fact that the abandonment came from within religious life.

Throughout its history, religious life suffered setbacks from outside — e.g., the Reformation in the sixteenth century, or the Secularization in the late eighteenth and early

nineteenth. Religious life also suffered decay and collapse from within; many of the monasteries that were secularized in the early nineteenth century were mere shells of their former selves, and observance had fallen off drastically. When a religious order declines and dies, it usually does so because of the abandonment of poverty and common life. History also attests to more than a few reforms of religious orders from within: Benedictines, Franciscans, Carmelites, and Cistercians are the most obvious examples.

In what follows, I will mention a few examples of what I mean. I don't want to spread gossip, and I don't imply that every religious order adopted all these changes. Many, though, are drawn from the experience of the order I know best, my own.

As I said, beginning around 1965, something unprecedented happened: religious undertook the abandonment of signs, voluntarily and even enthusiastically. I was a witness to it, and even took part in it, with some eagerness and conviction. Religious or clerical dress was abandoned, and secular dress was adopted, on the grounds that it would bring us closer to the people. (A Jesuit who works on a university campus on which the Jesuits have abandoned clerical dress was recently quoted as saying, "Nobody knows who we are. We should get T-shirts or sweatshirts or something." What might that "something" be?) Having buffet meals rather than a common dinner would make us more apostolically available; but common grace and common visits to the Blessed Sacrament after dinner disappeared along with the common meal. With the abandonment of the horarium, morning visit and night visit disappeared. For a while, it seemed that the answer to anyone's problem was to move out of the community into an apartment. Religious began to have checking accounts, and they depended less and less on the community for clothing, furniture, or recreation. Vacations together evaporated, as members took private vacations or went off in small, self-selecting groups.

I'm not saying that all religious did all these things; and, since the 60s and 70s, there has been some self-correction. What has not taken place, I suggest, is serious reflection on the meaning of the signs and symbols that marked religious life.

7. Existence without signs — i.e., the attempt to communicate meaning or reality without signs, is impossible.

On the most basic level, we must acknowledge that it is impossible, in this life, to have meaning without signs. Communication depends on signs, the most basic of which are words. We are always communicating, and hence we are always using signs. Even the Holy Scriptures are a sign. In an extraordinarily beautiful paragraph, St. Augustine described how the Scriptures will not be needed in the Beatific Vision: “When our Lord Jesus Christ has come, . . . lamps will not be necessary. A prophet will not be read to us, the book of the Apostle will not be opened; we shall not seek the testimony of John, we shall not need the Gospel itself. Therefore, all the Scriptures will be taken from our midst which were burning as lamps for us in the night of this world that we might not remain in the darkness.”⁴ But we are not yet in that state of blessedness. On a far more mundane level, life in community is a sign, too; and, like all signs, it always communicates some meaning, if not always the right one. The five-year old nephew of a friend of ours visited our community. He saw a group of men living together without women. His five-year old mind sought a category to interpret this sign: and he concluded that we were cowboys.

8. When religious rejected or abandoned common or historical signs, they did not live without signs but adopted new ones.

As already pointed out, some religious in the past abandoned the habit, often in times of stress; others never had a habit. Some were forced to live apart from communities, often for a high ideal, like missionaries. The customary signs of religious life might be abandoned, but we cannot live without signs. Once common signs are abandoned, other signs step in to take their

⁴*Tractates on John*, 35, 9 (trans. John W. Rettig, *St Augustine: Tractates on the Gospel of John 28–54*, Fathers of the Church 88 (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1993), 79.

place — in many cases, signs that divide rather than unite. Father A wears neckties to work, Father B wears a clerical collar. Each thinks he's right, and hence (by implication, at least) that the other is wrong. Sister C wears simple, dark-colored — albeit secular — clothing, and no jewelry; Sister D has some brightly colored, stylish clothing and several pairs of fine earrings. In each case, a sign is pointing to a reality beyond itself: the question is, which reality?

9. The new signs often pointed to secularity, disunity, and comfort.

Perhaps it's a distinctly American trait, but we seem eager to make our lives better, more comfortable. The sets of signs that some individual religious or communities have adopted send a clear message to the community and to the world outside the community. Perhaps religious need to stop and ask what that message is.

10. Appropriate reform or progress will probably not be achieved by restoration of the (poorly remembered) past, but by rigorous reform and the establishment of a renewed set of common signs and symbols.

Since this tenth and last thesis concerns the future, I have little comment to make on it; perhaps it contains a question that each of us needs to ask.

Conclusion

After all that I've said, and all the cautions I've introduced, what is the point of this reflection?

First, we employ signs and symbols because they facilitate communication. A sign is not only a thing known first, but a thing known more easily and more quickly. In traffic signs, the meaning of the horizontal bar is perceived more quickly than the words "One Way — Do Not Enter." Perhaps the veil or the habit do the same thing.

In religious life, there are both signs and symbols. The fact that all the members of a teaching community live in the same size rooms, no matter what their position or salary, is a

sign. The brown cassock and the rope belt is a symbol, a sign with additional meaning assigned to it by the founder.

To live religious life without signs and symbols is impossible. We are sign-makers and live in a world of signs. Of course, it is possible to have signs without signification, as one might see in a dying monastery. What happened in the past forty years or so is not the abolition of signs but the dissolution of common signs. Often in the name of apostolic service or availability, common signs were rejected. Work, for example, would always excuse a religious from prayer, Mass, or a meal. The result was not an absence of signs but a new set of signs that separated or divided rather than uniting. A community without common signs often enough lost the meaning that those signs were meant to express.

In other words, sign and thing signified are intimately connected. At least since the Fall, signs are necessary to communication — language is only the most obvious example. For religious to think that they can exist or flourish without the signs of religious life and community life is a form of angelism.

At the end of this presentation, I have no formula that will solve the problem I have raised. I doubt that brute restorationism is the answer. But all of us, I suspect, know of some orders that are flourishing, and others that are dying. “Liberal” and “conservative” are generally not helpful analytical categories; they stop action and reflection rather than encourage it. Rather than speaking of liberal or conservative orders, we might find some other criterion for evaluating them. I have suggested that religious should reflect on their lives in terms of signs, symbols, and signification. Perhaps we are on the way to some new insight. But one thing is certain: as the Carthusian monk said, “If you tear down the symbols, then you tear down the walls of your own house.”