

RES SACRA

MALCOLM MAGEE, O.P.

IN last month's article 'Sacrament and Symbol' we saw something of the nature of the sacramental sign and its relationship to the human creature for whom it was instituted. But the sign exists for the sake of the thing signified and its most important function (though not its only function) is to lead us to a knowledge of this thing signified. In this article, therefore, I propose to give a short account of what St Thomas understood by *res sacra*, the sacred reality lying behind the sign.

For this sacred reality is the thing signified. 'A sacrament', says St Augustine, 'is the sign of a sacred reality'; and St Thomas adds, 'in so far as it is making men holy'. The Augustinian definition is too wide; as wide, in fact, as it possibly can be for it includes the whole of creation. Everything is a sign of the supreme Sacred Reality, which is in fact the Creator, who has left his mark on his works. In this sense, as we have already seen, the whole of creation is sacramental. St Thomas adds the specific difference to St Augustine's generic definition: the Christian sacrament is the sign of a sacred reality in a very special way, namely, 'in so far as it is making men holy'. But even here there is an ambiguity in the definition for the subject of the second verb may be either 'sign' or 'sacred reality'. Which is it that sanctifies, the sign or the thing signified? The answer we give to this question will largely depend on the views we hold as to the nature of sacramental causality, but as a matter of exegesis there can be no doubt that for St Thomas the 'it' in the definition refers to 'sacred reality' (IIIa, 60, 3, ad 2). It is the thing signified in the act of sanctifying (notice the use of the present participle in the definition instead of the more natural use of the indicative, emphasizing the presence of the thing signified) which is symbolized by the sacraments of the New Law.

But there are three different ways in which the thing signified may be related to the sign. First, the thing signified may be something which existed in the past but which no longer exists, and then the sign is said to be *commemorative*; it points backwards

in time to some historical event. A war memorial, for example, is a commemorative sign; the sacrament of the Paschal meal in the Old Law was a commemorative sign, a reminder of the saving of Israel from the tenth plague. Secondly, the thing signified may be something which does not yet exist but which will exist in the future, and then the sign is said to be *forward-looking*. A red sky in the evening is the indication of a good day to come and is therefore a forward-looking sign, as are all foreshadowings of future events. All the sacraments of the Old Law were forward-looking signs just as the whole history of Israel was 'prognostic', typological, anticipating the supreme sacrament of the Incarnation. Thirdly, the thing signified may be something which is present but invisible and then the sign is said to be *demonstrative*; as the symptoms are demonstrative of the illness or as laughter is the sign of joy. The demonstrative sign is the most perfect kind of sign for signification, strictly speaking, is only fully present when the thing signified is also present, real, hidden behind the sign.

All of these characteristics are possessed by the Christian sacraments, the richest of all signs; and corresponding to these characteristics of the sacramental sign are three distinct elements within the thing signified. The sacrament is a commemorative sign because it is a memorial and re-presentation of the mysteries of Christ, his Passion, Death and Resurrection. These are events which happened in the past and happened once for all; our faith is anchored in history and the sacraments preserve the memory of these events from which they derive their power. This commemorative symbolism is not difficult to interpret in the sacrament of the Eucharist for the whole of the Mass liturgy points to the sacrifice of Calvary. 'The divine wisdom', writes the present Pope, 'has devised a way in which our Redeemer's sacrifice is marvellously shown forth by external signs symbolic of death. By the transubstantiation of bread into the body of Christ and of wine into his blood both his body and blood are rendered really present; but the eucharistic species under which he is present symbolize the violent separation of his body and blood, and so a commemorative showing forth of the death which took place in reality on Calvary is repeated in each Mass, because by distinct representations Christ Jesus is signified and shown forth in the state of victim.' (*Christian Worship*, C.T.S. p.36.) Nor is it difficult

to see how Baptism is a showing forth of the mysteries of Christ, for the Death and Resurrection symbolism of St Paul's Epistle to the Romans (vi, 3) shows how solidly this interpretation is rooted in Christian tradition. But with the other sacraments the symbolism is much more obscure.

Even more obscure is the prefiguring of our future glory, the second element within the sacred reality, for the sign of something unknown which is yet to come is much more indeterminate than the sign of something present or something which existed in the past. The sacrament is a forward-looking sign because it points to eternal life, our union with God. In the Eucharist this union is adumbrated in our Communion with the body and blood of Christ, the Word made flesh; so also is it foreshadowed in matrimony, the union of man and woman symbolizing the union of Christ and the Church.

For these reasons as well as for those given in the previous article St Thomas regards the third element within the sacred reality as being that which is formally signified. This is the sacramental grace which each sacrament produces, and which corresponds to the demonstrative character of the sign. The other two are symbolized only because of their relationship to this grace, the Passion as its cause, the vision of God as its effect; for it is grace alone which is actually present when the signifying action has been completed, sanctifying grace which the sign 'contains'.

The sacred reality behind the sign, therefore, is the whole mystery of our Redemption in its successive stages of development: the Passion and Death of Christ in the past; the life of grace in the present; and our future glory in the vision of God. The greatest of the sacraments is also the most perfect in symbolizing all three of these elements: 'O sacred banquet in which Christ is eaten: the memory of his passion is recalled, the mind is filled with grace and we are given a pledge of future glory'. The other sacraments symbolize them in greater or less degree. But each sacrament signifies the grace it produces and this is the true mystery hidden and revealed by the sign. Behind St Thomas's precise technical language lie all the riches of the oldest tradition in sacramental theology, the sacraments understood as 'mystery' in the early Christian sense or in the sense given to it by St Isidore (as well as the more modern interpretation of the word by Dom

Casel and the Benedictines of Maria Laach). For the effect of the mysteries of Christ is the mystery of grace, and grace in its turn is the seed of the mystery of eternal life.



PAUL VERLAINE, MYSTIC AND SINNER

1844 — 1896

S. G. A. LUFF

THE poetry of Paul Verlaine is a challenge to the conventional reader of religious literature. It is neither decreed nor supposed that every author of meditations or guides to the spiritual life be a saint, either in glory or, by reputation, in the flesh, but it is disconcerting if he is, publicly and, so to say, extravagantly, a sinner. It can hardly affect the reputation of Verlaine to say now, fifty years after his death, that he is best remembered as a poet who sinned. Such a reputation alone might have effectively excluded him from the catalogue of religious writers. Verlaine enjoyed, however, the distinction of having published, in what appeared subsequently as little more than an interruption in his wayward career, poetic witness to a state of conversion and intimate conversation with God. He failed to win much sympathy from contemporary French Catholics, and it is difficult now to accord his religious poetry the esteem which, on its own merits exclusively, it deserves. In fact, he poses a problem. Honesty demands that the boldness of his offence be not concealed. Born in 1844, the young Verlaine was of that type, increasingly familiar, whose sensitive perception of human values is so refined, yet so estranged from grace, that a psychological impasse is inevitably reached. The least offensive form it takes is a rebellion against conventions in manners or in mind, the worst, a repudiation of moral codes. A fundamental denial of spiritual values need not be read into this attitude—the subject is often too intelligent to deny so explicitly his spiritual perceptions, except when passion, fostered by his pet perversions, drives both mind and heart to hibernation over a prolonged winter of discontent.