I. The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence

1. Preliminary Considerations: The Crisis of the Sacramental Idea in Modern Consciousness

In the present intellectual situation, whoever attempts to reflect on the sacramental basis of Christian existence will immediately run into a remarkable paradox of contemporary intellectual life: on the one hand, our age has been called the century of the Church; it could just as well be called the century of the liturgical and sacramental movement, for the discovery of the Church that took place in the time between the two world wars is based on the rediscovery of the spiritual riches of ancient Christian liturgy and on the discovery of the sacramental principle. Perhaps the most fruitful theological idea of our century, the mystery theology of Odo Casel, belongs to the field of sacramental theology, and one can probably say without exaggeration that not since the end of the patristic era has the theology of the sacraments experienced such a flowering as was granted to it in this century in connection with Casel’s ideas, which in turn can be understood only against the background of the Liturgical Movement and its rediscovery of ancient Christian liturgy.

But all of this is still only one side of the facts of the case. For our century of the Liturgical Movement and the renewal of sacramental theology is experiencing at the same time a crisis of sacramentality, an alienation from the reality of the sacrament that can scarcely have existed with such severity and intensity within Christianity before. In a time when we have grown accustomed to seeing in the substance of things nothing but the material for human labor—when, in short, the world is regarded as matter and matter as material—initially there is no room left for that symbolic transparency of reality toward the eternal on which the

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resurgence of the mythological idea that man can be influenced spiritually by earthly nourishment—a magical-mystical notion, therefore, that runs entirely counter to our knowledge of psychology and physiology? And eventually all this is inevitably condensed into the question about the meaning of Christian worship in the first place. Why, really, do I have to go to church in order to encounter God? Is God then bound to a rite and to a place? Can what is spiritual be mediated or even bound by ritual and material means? If anyone wants to and does or perhaps even needs to live on this level, let him do so, modern man will say, confident that he dwells on the heights of contemporary consciousness and is fully cognizant, moreover, of the fact that even today there are still people on a medieval or ancient or utterly primitive level of consciousness. But he himself will not be bound to levels of consciousness that he is convinced are relics of the past that the future will gradually eliminate, even if it will never be able to remove completely the undercurrent of primitive thinking, so that mankind in practice will always consist of a coexistence of different levels of consciousness.

Therefore, what should we say? Is the continued existence of the sacraments in our time nothing more than a concession to the past, to the inv incibly primitive character of one part of mankind? Is it an aesthetic embellishment from the spirit of a long-gone world that modern man, too, tolerates with critical awareness, or is it an abiding claim and a reality that is still an existentially foundational reality today? A liturgical renewal that did not ask these basic questions would necessarily remain superficial and could hardly avoid the danger of becoming a merely aesthetic business. In order to attempt an answer to the question about the relation between sacrament and Christian existence, we must ask two questions that are announced in the two topics of this lecture: What is a sacrament? And: What is human existence? The two questions, however, overlap so much that it may suffice to analyze the question about sacrament so as to listen at the same time within it to the question about man’s existence and thus to provide an answer to both questions.

2. The Sacramental Idea in Human History

What is a sacrament? The question is very far-reaching: the scope of it changes depending upon whether the question is posed in terms
of the history of religion or theologically, and within theology it makes a difference whether one approaches the question historically or dogmatically, for in different periods of Christian history the word "sacrament" meant different things. Let us not hesitate to reflect on all three aspects of the question, for in a certain sense they all belong to the theme of the sacraments and the less exclusively we proceed with the questioning, the more comprehensive the answer can be. First of all, concerning human history on the whole, we will thus be able to establish that there is in it something like primeval sacraments, which appear with a sort of inherent necessity wherever men live together, and that in many metamorphoses they even extend into the de-sacramentalized technological world. One could call them creation sacraments, which develop at the important junctures of human existence and reveal both a picture of the essence of man and also the nature of his relation to God. Such important junctures are birth and death, a meal, and sexual relations. Obviously we are dealing with realities that do not actually proceed from the spiritual dimension of man but, rather, proceed from his biological nature, the junctures of his biological life, which is constantly realized and renewed in the taking of nourishment and in sexual relations, but in birth and death mysteriously experiences its limits, its contact with what is uncontrollable, greater, and other, out of which it perpetually rises but which also seems to swallow it up again immediately. These biological givens, the real actualizations of the stream of life in which man participates, acquire of course in man, as an entity that extends beyond the biological, a new dimension; they become—to use Schleiermacher’s words—the fissures through which the eternal looks into the uniformity of the human routine. Precisely because these events are biological and not spiritual, man has in them an experience of being overwhelmed by a power that he can neither summon nor control, that already embraces and carries him along even before his decisions. This already suggests a further point: what is biological in man, as an entity that exists spiritually, acquires a new meaning and a new depth. Human eating is something different from the food intake of an animal: eating attains its human dimension by becoming a meal. Having a meal, however, means experiencing the delightful-ness of those things whereby men are supplied with the gift of the earth’s fertility, and having a meal means to experience also, in such a reception of the choice things of the earth, the company of other

men: a meal creates community, eating is complete only when it happens in company, and human coexistence achieves its fullness in the community of nourishment that unites everyone in the common interest of receiving the gifts of this earth. But in this way the meal becomes a very penetrating interpretation of what it means to be a man, of human existence, for which we wanted to be on the look-out along with the question about the sacraments. In a meal man discovers that he is not the founder of his own being but lives his existence in receptivity. He experiences himself as someone who has been endowed, who lives on the unmerited gift of a fruitfulness that seems always to be waiting for him, as it were. And what is more: he experiences the fact that his existence, his “being-there” [Dasein], is grounded in communion with, or “being-with” [Mitsein mit], the world, in whose stream of life he is immersed, and that it is founded on communion with men, without which his humanity would lose the ground under its feet. Man is not founded on himself; rather, he is founded through a twofold “with”: communion with things, communion with people; man can exist only in the plural, so to speak. But in this double “with” is concealed a third, no less fundamental thing: his mind is only by communion with the body, just as, of course, his body too, his biological being, consists only of being in terms of his rational dimension.

The communion of the mind with the body, however, includes being immersed into the unity of the cosmic stream of life and thus expresses a fundamental interconnectedness of all those beings who are privileged to be called human: this is the starting point of that deep-seated community which the Bible suggests when it calls all mankind a single Adam. Of course in the connection to one another that is produced by a common biological life, there is still at the same time the reason for a deep-seated separation of men from one another that ultimately keeps them from being of one mind and from finding their way to full community; we will have to reflect more on this.

The phenomenon of the meal led us unexpectedly to an initial outline of an answer to the question “what is man?”, although our actual purpose in taking it up had been to get a view of one of the primeval sacraments identified by the history of religions. But the two things do overlap, and the interpretation of being human that just now forced itself on us is the interpretation on which the sacramental idea is based. For we can say now, in a first attempt at formulating it, that in the
transformation of mere eating into the meal the original formation of the sacramental principle is accomplished: eating that has become a meal already bears sacramental traits in and of itself. The man who in a meal not only attempts the unspiritual biological act of food intake but also performs this biological act rationally, spiritually—the man, therefore, who considers human nature to be indivisible and thus considers what is biological to be human also—this man experiences in a meal the transparency of the sensible toward the spiritual; he experiences that interpenetration of bios and spirit which is his inmost essence. He discovers that things are more than things: that they are signs whose meaning extends beyond their immediate sensorial power. And when he experiences the foundation of his existence in a meal, then he knows that things give him more than they themselves have and are. In this way, however, the meal becomes for him a sign of the divine and the eternal that supports him and all things and men and is the real foundation of his existence. But at the same time he knows that since he himself is spirit only as body and body only from spirit, this divine element can meet him in no other way than in the sphere in which he has his humanity, namely, through the medium of common humanity and corporeality, without which he would necessarily cease to be a man. The sacrament in its universal form in the history of religion is therefore at first simply the expression of the experience that God encounters man in a human way: in the signs of common humanity and in the change of the merely biological into the human, which when accomplished in the context of religion undergoes a transformation into a third dimension—the authentication of the divine in the human.

Right at this point it would not be difficult to formulate an initial answer to the crisis of sacramental thinking, the starting point of our reflections, and to expose the truncated anthropology on which it is based. But it is probably better to set aside this thought for now and to continue developing the sacramental concept as we intended. Upon closer inspection, the facts of the case that we have encountered so far contain something remarkable in themselves: the primordial sacramental forms found in human history are connected, not with specific spiritual and religious events, but with intensifications of the biological dimension of human existence; indeed, they are, as it were, the experience of the "transparency" of the biological, through which man can glimpse the spiritual and the eternal. Then, over the course of

The Sacramental Foundation of Christian Existence

history, the specifically human and spiritual domain developed its sacramental junctures, two of which especially stand out here. The first one arises from the primordial human experience of guilt. Man, who does not fashion his own existence but lives on an ontological endowment, experiences at the same time a sense of being obligated, of being governed by a predetermined form; failure to conform to it makes him guilty. Consequently, there is something like a sacrament of penance from the very beginning of human history, and St. Bonaventure, the great medieval Franciscan theologian, was not completely wrong when he said that two sacraments had already been instituted at the beginning of history and that they are as old as man himself: the sacraments of marriage and penance. In the religions of many nations, this has degenerated into the strangest external observances: it became a cult of washing or rituals of purification, of transferring guilt to animals or slaves, but in all of these somewhat repulsive, somewhat foolish rites, one still hears something like the stammering of an awareness that man experiences the nearness of his god by bowing down under the truth about his guilt; and when an attempt is made to cleanse the spiritual by corporeal methods, however absurd one may consider such a procedure, such rites still contain a moving cry for purification.

A second pattern of sacrament-like structure is found in the office of kings and priests: these decisive ministries in the community point again to the very basis of what is human, and their importance is not exhaustively defined by their social purposefulness; they are, rather, the expression of the transparency of the human toward the divine and at the same time the expression of the awareness that the human community is firmly anchored only when it does not depend merely on itself but, rather, is founded on what is greater than itself. Here of course we must add another remark that at the same time leads to the Christian formulation of the question. While the first group of sacramental patterns that we encountered is based on the relation of bios and spirit and, hence, causes the perpetual character of the connection between man and cosmos to become a sign for the connection between the divine and the human, the second group starts with the specifically human dimension of man, from which his individual and collective history accrues to him—a history that represents what is special and unique about him, as opposed to the everlasting sameness of cosmic death and becoming. In this respect, another basic type of sacrament could have arisen here, as we observed previously, which
would have understood history as existentially fundamental for man and would have seen in historical events the mediation of the eternal. On the whole, however, that did not happen in non-Christian lands. Rather, the historical community is perceived as a copy of the cosmos, and the mediation of the divine that occurs within it is ultimately reduced to the cosmic-natural idea.

3. The Christian Sacraments

At this point we can now finally raise the question that is unavoidably suggested by the previous considerations: What is distinctive about Christianity? What is special about it in a world that at one time was influenced everywhere by the sacramental idea? Karl Barth protested, but—to say it at the outset—I do not think he is correct in seeing a strict opposition between religion and faith, so that the [Christian] faith would only be something totally other, completely discontinuous with all the religious history of mankind; nor do I think that the oversimplifications entailed in the notion of anonymous Christianity are right in suddenly trying now to declare the whole world always to have been anonymously Christian anyway. The reality is more complicated than such oversimplifications may admit.

What is a Christian sacrament? As already noted at the start, this word did not have from the beginning the clearly defined meaning that we attach to it today. In the early Church, sacraments were understood to include historical events, words of Holy Scripture, realities of Christian worship that have a transparency to the salvific act of Jesus Christ and, thus, make the eternal shine through into the temporal, indeed, cause it to become present as the truly fundamental reality. For example, in patristic language the story of the deluge can be called a “sacrament”, because in it we glimpse something of the mystery of that new beginning which is accomplished in destruction—this structure is continued in the death of Jesus Christ on the Cross, in which the tides of death, as it were, crash down on him, yet the sinking of the old clears the way for the Resurrection, for his definitive presence in the midst of all those who believe in him; the same structure then reaches farther into history in the rite of Baptism, in which man lets the waters of death pass over him so as to enter into the new beginning that started with Christ. Another example: the wedding feast at Cana is called a sacrament, because in that change of water into wine shines forth the mystery of the new wine with which Christ desired to fill the jugs of mankind by his Passion. And so many other examples could be given.

If we reflect on what has been said thus far, we can ascertain various similarities with the general “anthropological” idea of sacrament, but we can also clearly recognize already traces of what is distinctively Christian; this distinction initially and necessarily results simply through the clarification of the concept of God: who God is no longer remains in dark secrecy; no more does he appear as the unfathomable mystery of the cosmos in general, but, rather, he appears as the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob; more precisely, as the God of Jesus Christ: as the God who is here for men and is defined precisely by his being with people. In a word: he appears as the personal God who is knowledge and love and who therefore is word and love with respect to us. Word that calls us, and the love that unites us.

With that presupposition, our previous findings certainly come into play in this new context: if historical events, words of Scripture, and cultic realities can be called sacraments, then this means that the early Christian concept of sacrament included an interpretation of the world, of man, and of God that is convinced of the fact that things are not just things and material for our labor; rather, they are at the same time signs pointing beyond themselves of that divine love toward which they become transparent for someone who has sight. “Water” is not just H₂O, a chemical compound that one can change by an appropriate method into other compounds and use for all sorts of purposes—in the water from a spring that the thirsty traveler encounters in the desert, something becomes visible of the mystery of refreshment that creates new life in the midst of despair; in the powerful waves of a river, on whose crests the brightness of the sun is reflected, something becomes visible of the might of the glory of creative love and also of the deadly force with which it can hit the man who gets in its way; in the majesty of the sea glimmers something of the mystery that we designate with the word “eternity”. That is just one example to suggest what is meant when we say: Things are more than things. They are not known exhaustively when one has understood their chemical and physical properties, because then another whole dimension of their reality still eludes one: their transparency toward the creative power of the God from
which they come and toward which they try to lead. The sacramental idea of the early Church is the expression of a symbolic understanding of the world that does not in the least dispute the earthly reality of things but at the same time points to a content that remains inaccessible to chemical analysis and yet does not cease to be real—to the dimension of the eternal, which is perceptible and present in the midst of the temporal.

Again it is clear that with that we have said something decisive about man: just as things are not merely things, material for human labor, so man is not merely a functionary who manipulates things; rather, only by examining the world with respect to its eternal first cause does man learn who he himself is: someone called by God and to God. Only the call of the eternal constitutes man as man. One could actually define him as the being capable of God: what theology tries to designate with the term "soul" is of course nothing other than the fact that man is known and loved by God in another way than all the other beings below him—known in order to know in return, loved in order to love in return. This sort of staying in God's memory is what makes man live forever—for God's memory never ends; it is what makes a human being man and distinguishes him from animals; if this is ruled out, then, instead of man, only a more highly developed animal is left. But in this way it has become a bit clearer in what sense we may speak about the sacramental foundation of human existence: If being called by God not only brings about man's humanity but constitutes it, then the transparency of the world toward the eternal, which is the basis of the sacramental principle, belongs to the foundation of his existence. Then sacramental communication with the eternal establishes man himself.

We must, however, take yet another step. For the Christian sacraments mean not only insertion into the God-permeated cosmos—in a certain sense, as we have seen, this could be shown absolutely even in the pre-Christian world—they mean at the same time insertion into the history that originates in Christ. Indeed, this addition of the historical dimension represents the distinctively Christian transformation of the sacramental idea, which for the first time gives to natural symbolism its binding force and its concrete claim, cleanses it of all ambiguity and makes it into a more certain guarantee for the nearness of the one true God, who is not just (for example) the mysterious abyss of the cosmos but, rather, its Lord and Creator. This truly Christian element, which we are thus beginning to track down, is of course simultaneously the real stumbling block for contemporary man, who at any event is still ready to attribute some divine mystery to the cosmos but is not quite capable of seeing how the fortuitousness of a series of historical events could possibly contain the decisive factor of his human destiny. And yet that should not be so impossible to understand. For indeed, man is historically determined, from the ground up; it is precisely his essence to be historical: one cannot contrast a timeless enduring essence with the change and chance of history without misunderstanding man fundamentally, for in him history and essence coincide and the one is real only in the other.

Let us say it more concretely: my humanity is realized in the word, in the language that shapes my thought and initiates me into the neighborly community that influences my own humanity. Language, however, which we may describe as the essential medium for realizing human existence, is not something that I myself create; indeed, it fulfills its purpose precisely through and in the fact that it unites me with the men around me and with the men before me: language is the expression of the continuity of the human mind in the historical development of its nature. But in this way it becomes evident that being human excludes all autonomy of the bare ego that tries to be self-sufficient: my humanity initially receives its foundation as well as the sphere of its possibilities and accomplishments through history, out of which and in which alone it is able to be. What is seemingly fortuitous in history is the essential thing for man (to repeat this once again); certainly, to the collective model into which he enters, he can add his own personal initiatives to a greater or lesser extent and, thus, become guilty or saved, but he cannot break loose from history and abandon it for a supposedly pure nature, which is a utopia wherein he misunderstands himself.

With that we can return again to the Christian sacraments, whose meaning is none other than the insertion of man into the historical context that comes from Christ. To receive the Christian sacraments means to enter into the history proceeding from Christ with the belief that this is the saving history that opens up to man the historical context that truly allows him to live and leads him into his true uniqueness—into the unity with God that is his eternal future. So now, recapitulating, we can determine in what sense the sacraments are fundamental for Christian existence: first of all, they express
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the vertical dimension of human existence; they refer to the call of God that makes a man human in the first place. But they also point beyond that to the horizontal dimension of the history of faith that comes to us from Christ, for human existence in its concrete form rests on this horizontal dimension—it is historically mediated and comes into its own only in this historical mediation. In the confusion of human history that initially seems to ensnare man in the inescapability of guilt, the sacraments lead him into the historical context with that man who was at the same time God; they thus provide for him, in the midst of the insurmountable connection with history and precisely through it, a liberating union with God's eternal love, which has fit itself into this horizontal dimension and thereby has broken into his prison: the chain of the horizontal that binds man has become in Christ the guide rope of salvation that pulls us to the shore of God's eternity.

Let us consider another point: without noticing it, we have already arrived, with this analysis of the sacramental dimension of Christian life, at the narrower dogmatic concept of sacrament in contemporary theology, whose chief characteristics we duly learned from our catechism: institution by Christ—outward sign—interior grace. Why these three belong together and why they constitute the reality called “sacrament” should now have become clear to some extent: the visible realities that (already in terms of their creaturely definition) display, as it were, a certain permeability for the Creator-God have acquired a new, existentially decisive meaning by the fact that they are inserted into the context of the history of Christ and have become means of mediating this new historical context. Because they have now taken over the function of directing man into this historical sphere, they have become carriers of his historical significance and his spiritual might and thus, in truth, salvific forces and a pledge of the coming glory.

4. The Meaning of the Sacraments Today

Perhaps the preceding considerations were a bit laborious. That could not be helped, but still it had the advantage of clearing away the rubble of prejudices that separates us men of today from those insights that are expressed, indeed, embodied in the Christian sacraments. Now it would not be difficult to investigate the meaning of the individual sacraments and thereby to make concrete the general insights to which the preceding considerations have led us. Let us refrain from doing that and simply make clear once again in a summary fashion what limitations of perspective separate contemporary man—that is, us—from the sacraments and what the Christian truly seeks when he celebrates his divine liturgy in the form of receiving the sacraments and, thus, in the manner of the Church of Jesus Christ. I believe that the hostile attitude toward the sacraments that is part of the average mentality today is based on a twofold anthropological error that originates in the presuppositions of our time (that is, in the historical form that precedes and receives us) and has sunk deep into the universal consciousness. The first influence still at work is the idealistic misreading of human nature that reached its extreme exaggeration in the writings of Fichte, as though each man were an autonomous spirit who constructs himself wholly out of his own decision-making ability and is entirely the product of his own choices—nothing but will and freedom, which tolerates nothing unspiritual but, rather, forms himself completely by himself. Fichte's creative ego rests, to put it mildly, on a confusion of man with God, and the identification of the two that he in fact makes is an altogether logical expression of his approach and of course at the same time its categorical condemnation, for man is not God: all it takes to know that, basically, is to be a human being oneself. As absurd as this idealism is in the final analysis, it is still has deep roots in the European (at least in the German) consciousness.

When Bultmann says that spirit cannot be nourished by material things and with that thinks he has dispensed with the sacramental principle, ultimately the same naive notion about man's spiritual autonomy is still at work. Actually it strikes us as a bit odd that precisely in the period that believes it has rediscovered man's corporeality and also thinks it knows that man can be spirit only by way of corporeality, a spiritual metaphysics based on the denial of these connections continues to operate or has even just reached the apogee of its influence. To be fair, we will of course have to admit that Christian metaphysics, long before Fichte, ingested an all-too-strong dose of Greek idealism and in this way did a considerable amount to prepare the way for this misunderstanding. It, too, already regarded human souls to a great extent as isolated atoms, constructing themselves in ahistorical freedom; thus it could scarcely explain any more the historically determined articles of the Christian faith concerning original sin and redemption; instead
of the sacraments, which are the expression of the historical intertwining of men, we find the soul food of the self-sufficient individual spirit, in which case one can of course wonder why God did not choose a simpler path and present himself as spirit to man's spirit so as to impart his grace to him. If it were only a question of the individual soul being addressed as an individual by its God and receiving grace, then indeed it would not be clear what significance the interference of the Church and the material means of the sacraments are supposed to have in this very intimate, altogether interior and spiritual process. If, however, there is no such thing as the autonomy of the human spirit, if it is not a spiritual atom without relations to others but, rather, can live as a man only corporeally, with his fellow men and historically, then the question is fundamentally different. Then his relationship to God, if it is to be a human relationship to God, must be just as man is: corporeal, fraternal, and historical. Or there is no such thing. The error of anti-sacramental idealism consists in the fact that it wants to make man into a pure spirit in God's sight. Instead of a man, the only thing remaining is a ghost that does not exist, and any religiosity that tried to build on such foundations has built on shifting sand.

Connected today in a peculiar way with the idealistic heresy (if we wish to call it that) is the Marxist heresy, about which Heidegger wittily said that materialism consists, not really in the fact that it interprets all being as matter but, rather in the fact that it classifies all matter as mere material for human labor. Indeed, here in the anthropological extension of the ontological approach lies the real heart of the heresy: in the reduction of man to homo faber, who does not deal with things in themselves but considers them only as functions of work, whose functionary he himself has become. With that, the symbolic perspective and man's ability to see the eternal fall by the wayside; he is now imprisoned in his world of work, and his only hope is that later generations will be able to have better working conditions than he did, if he has toiled sufficiently for the creation of such conditions. A truly paltry consolation for an existence that has become miserably confined!

With these perspectives we have automatically returned once again to the starting point of our considerations. We can now ask the question again in this way: What does a man actually do when he celebrates the divine liturgy of the Church, the sacraments of Jesus Christ? He does not resign himself to the naïve notion that the omnipresent

God would dwell only in this precise place that is designated by the tabernacle in the church. That would contradict even the most superficial knowledge of the Church's dogmatic teaching, for the specific feature of the Eucharist is not the presence of God in general but rather the presence of the man Jesus Christ, which points to the horizontal, historically bound character of man's encounter with God. Someone who goes to church and receives the sacraments does this, if he understands the whole situation correctly, not because he thinks the spiritual God needs material means in order to touch man's spirit. He does this, on the contrary, because he knows that he, being a man, can encounter God only in a human way; but in a human way means: in the form of fraternal solidarity, corporeality, and historicity. And he does this because he knows that he, as a man, cannot personally control when and how and where God has to manifest himself to him, that he is, on the contrary, the one receiving, the one dependent on the fullness of power that is simply given and not to be produced on his own authority. That power is the sign of the sovereign freedom of God, who himself determines the mode of his presence.

No doubt, our piety in this regard has often proceeded somewhat superficially and has been the occasion for various misunderstandings. In this respect, the critical question of modern consciousness can provoke a salutary purification in the self-understanding of faith. In conclusion, it may suffice to offer another example, in which the crisis becomes particularly clear and in which the basic idea of the purification that is needed can come to light once again by way of summary. Eucharistic adoration or a quiet visit in church, if it is to make sense, cannot simply be a conversation with the God who is thought to be present in a circumscribed locality. Statements such as "God dwells here" and conversations with the "local" God that are justified in this way manifest a misunderstanding of both the Christian mystery and the concept of God that is necessarily repellant to a thinking man who knows about God's omnipresence. If someone wished to justify going to church on the grounds that one must pay a visit to the God who is present only there, then that would in fact be a reason that made no sense and would rightly be rejected by modern man. Eucharistic adoration is in truth related to the Lord, who through his historical life and suffering has become "Bread" for us; in other words, through his Incarnation and self-abandonment to death he has become the One who is open for us. Such prayer is therefore related to the
historical mystery of Jesus Christ, to God’s history with men that moves toward us in the sacrament. And it is related to the mystery of the Church: since it is related to the history of God with men, it is related to the whole “Body of Christ”, to the community of believers, in which and through which God comes to us. In this way praying in church and before the Blessed Sacrament is the “classification” of our relation to God under the mystery of the Church as the specific locality where God meets us. And finally, this is the purpose of our going to church at all: so that I in an orderly fashion may take my place in God’s history with men—the only setting in which I as a man have my true human existence and which alone therefore also opens up for me the true space of my encounter with God’s eternal love. For this love does not seek merely an isolated spirit, which (as we have already said) would be only a ghost compared with man’s reality; rather, it seeks man utterly and entirely, in the body of his historicity, and it gives him in the holy signs of the sacraments the guarantee of a divine answer in which the open question of being human arrives at its goal and comes to its fulfillment.

II. On the Concept of Sacrament

Christians today are still very familiar with the concept of “sacrament”; they encounter it continually in the Christian life. Yet it is very far removed from contemporary man’s consciousness and life experience. To him a sacrament seems to be something strange that he is inclined to relegate to a magical or mythical age of mankind; he cannot quite figure out where it belongs in a rational and technological world. Therefore we are faced with the dilemma that this reality is central for the Christian consciousness but marginal for the normal awareness of everyday life today; this dilemma illustrates, indeed is emblematic of, the breach in Christian consciousness today. If we want to attempt, under these conditions, to recover the concept of sacrament, it is necessary to ascertain, first, what common human presuppositions and points of reference it contains within itself, so that from there we can arrive at what is specifically Christian about it.

If we do this, we run into two problems. On the one hand, we encounter a basic form of human understanding and human communication that has found its characteristically Christian expression in the sacrament: the symbol. In order to understand the nature of the sacrament—its lasting validity and the manner in which it reveals reality—one would therefore have to inquire about what a symbol is, how it can establish fellowship and communion in a common perception of reality, and to what extent it is possible to gain access to reality in the first place.¹ If one does this, the second step is

¹The pertinent discussion of Jean Daniélou with René Guénon is important. It is to their credit that they have worked out the meaning of symbolic (as opposed to scientific) knowledge in its uniqueness and made it respectable. See Jean Daniélou, Vom Geheimnis der Geschichte (Stuttgart, 1955), 144–70. Important for the development of the concept of Christian symbol and sacrament are the studies written by Hans Urs von Balthasar in 1936 and 1937 on Origen’s idea of mystery, which are found in a revised form in his book: Parole et