THCT202 MODULE 1:
SYMBOL AND RITUAL

Unit Overview
Required Readings and Related Activities
Module 1 Introduction
Symbolism... Rituals... Christian Rituals
Symbols are Actions, not Objects
Symbols from Everyday Life
Extension Readings
Conclusion
THCT202 UNIT OVERVIEW

THCT202 introduces you to the study of sacramental rituals and the key symbols they employ to express, nourish, and strengthen the faith of Christian believers. This unit focuses in particular on the official rituals and theology of the Roman Catholic tradition, but much of the material it explores is pertinent to other Christian traditions as well.

Every sacramental ritual is accompanied by an official theological explanation of the Church’s understanding of the sacrament in terms of what happens to the individual person receiving the sacrament as well as how the sacrament relates to the whole Christian community. This unit will highlight the role of the worshiping assembly in sacramental rituals, as the context within which individuals receive sacraments. Both the official rites and the theological explanations that accompany them will form part of what you are introduced to in this unit, so that you can gain an understanding of the theological, biblical and ecclesial meanings that are found in these rites.

THE SEVEN SACRAMENTS

THCT202 will explore notions of ritual, symbol and the principle of sacramentality in order to provide a broad context for an investigation of four of the Church’s seven sacraments: the Sacraments of Initiation (Baptism, Confirmation, and Eucharist) and the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It will focus in particular on how the Church celebrates these sacraments today, as well as providing some information on how these rituals developed historically.

THCT202 will investigate the Church’s teaching from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65) on Christ as Sacrament and Church as Sacrament, as these notions are key to understanding how each individual sacrament expresses a person’s relationship with Christ and with the Church.

SACRAMENTAL CELEBRATIONS

In THCT202, you will have the opportunity to learn how to prepare sacramental celebrations utilising the Church’s official liturgical books, and you will gain an understanding of the theological meaning of the central symbols employed in these rituals.

THCT202 will emphasise the importance of using good quality symbols in liturgical celebrations so that it becomes clear that how we celebrate (the care we take in preparing and enacting our rites) has a significant impact both on the assembly’s experience of those celebrations, and on our ability to enter into them meaningfully so that our faith is expressed, nourished and strengthened through the act of celebrating well.

READINGS AND ACTIVITIES

Completing the required readings and their related activities will enhance your understanding of the topics of Symbol and Ritual and will supplement and expand on the materials presented to you in lectures. Extension readings, videos and activities are available for those who are keen to investigate the topics of symbol and ritual further.

The key concepts introduced in these Required Readings will be referenced in all of your Assessment Tasks for THCT202.
REQUIRED READINGS AND RELATED ACTIVITIES

As you progress through the various modules of THCT202, you will be provided with activities and exercises designed to help you to get the most out of your Required Readings and to help you to think about how the ideas you encounter can be enacted in practice.

KEY-FOCUS QUESTIONS

As you engage with the Required Readings, it can be helpful to read with a particular question or focus in mind so that you can recognise more easily some of the central ideas you will come across in these texts.

Suggested key-focus questions are provided in the introductions to some of the Required Readings, but you may well bring your own key-questions to the readings, which can help to focus your own individual active-reading approach. Key-questions may also be generated for you by what you have read – keep a note of these questions so that you can ask them of your lecturer or tutor.

SHORT ACTIVITIES / EXERCISES

After you finish the Required Readings, it can be very helpful to complete a short activity or exercise which draws together the reading’s central ideas and helps you to ensure that you have understood them well. The Required Readings in THCT202 are be followed by exercises designed to highlight key concepts covered in the readings.
Module 1 introduces you to the concepts of ‘symbol’ and ‘ritual’ in a broad/secular context and in a more specific religious and Christian context. Having an appreciation for the power of symbols as they operate within rituals both to generate meaning and inform/shape individual and communal identity, will help to provide a deeper awareness of how important it is to use symbols well within Catholic/Christian ritual contexts so that the faith of the believers that is expressed in those symbols is nourished and strengthened by their effective use.

**READINGS AND ACTIVITIES**

In Module 1 you will find links to:

- three short **required readings** with activities
- two additional **non-required extension readings**

Completing the required readings and their related activities will enhance your understanding of the topics of Symbol and Ritual and will supplement and expand on the materials presented to you in lectures. Extension readings, videos and activities are available for those who are keen to investigate the topics of symbol and ritual further.

*The key concepts introduced in these Required Readings will be referenced in all of your Assessment Tasks for THCT202.*

**LEARNING OUTCOMES**

Completing this module will contribute to the following learning outcomes:

- Reflect critically on the theological, biblical and ecclesial meanings of the sacraments of initiation and reconciliation (GA4);
- Prepare sacramental celebrations utilising the Church’s official liturgical books, and explain their theological meaning (GA7, GA9);
- Identify and explain the theological meaning of the central symbols employed in the Church’s sacramental rituals (GA4, GA9).
1.1 SYMBOLISM... RITUALS... CHRISTIAN RITUALS

In the first part of *Christian Symbol and Ritual*, Bernard Cooke and Gary Macy provide an accessible academic introduction to the notions of symbolism and rituals in general, before they focus in on how these more general notions are recognisable in Christian rituals in particular.

### 1.1.1 DEFINE SYMBOL AND RITUAL

**PURPOSE:**
To identify and explain the notions of symbolism and rituals in general and how they are employed in the Church’s sacramental rituals. This activity relates directly to Learning Outcome 3 for THCT202.

**RESOURCES:**

**TASK:**
- List three specific characteristics of symbols identified by Cooke & Macy in the Introduction to *Symbol and Ritual*.
- Explain what is meant by Cooke & Macy when they write in chapter 1: “Every single ritual that ever happened or ever will happen is, was or will be unique.”
- Describe what makes Christian rituals unique when compared with those from other secular or religious contexts (as found in Cooke & Macy chapter 1).

### 1.2 SYMBOLS ARE ACTIONS, NOT OBJECTS

In a classic short article investigating how religious experience communicates meaning through symbols, American liturgical theologian Nathan Mitchell challenges commonly held (and often incorrect) notions of how symbols function, suggesting that rather than being ‘things’ that we invest with meaning, symbols are in fact actions via which we participate in realities that shape and form/inform us.

#### 1.2.1 RECOGNISE AND UTILISE REAL SYMBOLS

**PURPOSE:**
To consider the implications for planning sacramental liturgies. This activity relates directly to Learning Outcome 3 for THCT202 (GA4).

**RESOURCES:**

**TASK:**

As you read this short article:

- **Take particular note** of how Mitchell distinguishes between the notions of ‘sign,’ ‘signal’ and ‘symbol’, as understanding these impacts significantly on how we recognise and utilise *real symbols* in sacramental celebrations.
- **Consider carefully** the implications for planning liturgy that Mitchell identifies toward the end of the article as these need to be taken seriously when you are preparing to celebrate sacramental liturgies.
1.3 SYMBOLS FROM EVERYDAY LIFE TAKE ON NEW MEANING IN CATHOLIC RITUALS

In this chapter of Symbols that Surround Us, Johan Van Parys introduces four fundamental symbols that are commonly used in everyday life and in Catholic sacramental rituals.

1.3.1 REFLECT CRITICALLY

PURPOSE:
Describe and reflect on your understanding of one central Christian symbol. This activity relates directly to Learning Outcome 3 and GA4.

RESOURCES:

TASK:
Describe and reflect on your understanding of one central Christian symbol:

1. Choose one of these symbols and describe your understanding of its uses in everyday life, and how you have witnessed it being used in Catholic/Christian rituals.
2. Explain how the everyday use of the symbol you have chosen influences our understanding of its meaning in Catholic/Christian ritual (and vice versa).
3. Reflect on how you have seen this symbol being used in Catholic/Christian rites, and suggest ways in which it could be used more effectively in those rites so that it generates greater meaning for the worshipping assembly.

1.4 EXTENSION READINGS

THE LANGUAGE OF RITE

Would you like to explore the topic of Christian ritual further? The following reading by French Catholic theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet (Professor at l'Institut Catholique in Paris) provides a more advanced approach to understanding "The Language of Rite."

Available on reserve at the campus library.

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

For a more in-depth philosophical exploration of signs, symbols and how they express meaning, see the following reading by Catholic philosopher Louis Dupré (emeritus professor, Yale University). "Of Holy Signs."
1.5 CONCLUSION

Module 1 has introduced you to the concepts of ‘symbol’ and ‘ritual’ in a broad/secular context and in a more specific religious and Christian context. Having an appreciation for the power of symbols as they operate within rituals both to generate meaning and inform/shape individual and communal identity, will help to provide a deeper awareness of how important it is to use symbols well within Catholic/Christian ritual contexts so that the faith of the believers that is expressed in those symbols is nourished and strengthened by their effective use.

Module 2 will provide you with an orientation to the sacramental worldview which underlies the Catholic theological approach to all sacraments.

CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Throughout THCT202 you will be provided with opportunities to check on how well you have understood the unit’s content.

Short quizzes at the end of each Module will help you to focus on the key points of unit content covered in the Module and check that you have understood them correctly. The quizzes will also provide an opportunity for you to work toward achieving the Learning Outcomes and completing the Assessment Tasks of the unit.

Achieving 80% correct answers on the short quiz will provide you with access to the next Module.

Now return to Module 1 of THCT202 in LEO to complete the short quiz.