

"Faith & Values"
Feature Essay



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The loss of symbols also gives rise to thought

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More than forty years ago, the philosopher PAUL RICOEUR coined the phrase “the symbol gives rise to thought.” His analysis of religious symbolism demonstrated a crucial link between a way of thinking and a mode of expression, both of which are intimately connected to the depth of human experience.

Unlike the ordinary language by which we describe our living, and the more scientific language that gives precision to our knowing, symbols touch upon the realm of the mysterious. They point to meaning that reaches beyond us; they convey the meaningfulness that lies within us.



and human solidarity.

Even in a virtual world, where simulation has become astonishingly accurate and animation appears more and more life-like, symbols still hold sway by their power to touch deep-down and to evoke something profound. Consider, for instance, the flag-draped coffin of a fallen soldier, the sight of which moves one to silent attention, stirs one to grateful admiration, and gives rise to thoughts of civic

In the realm of religion, symbols remain necessary as means of communication because they express what cannot otherwise be conveyed by our limited language. By definition, symbols point beyond themselves to something else – to something “other” – and in this way they allow us to evoke what is super-natural and to encounter what transcends the ordinary.

Christians see this especially during Eastertide, whether in colors or sounds or things. The penitential purples of Lent and the bloody crimsons of the Passion give way to the dazzling whites of the Resurrection. The uplifting tone of words like “hosanna” and “alleluia” touch a chord in the soul when sung aloud. Most of all, a **paschal candle** remains lit to symbolize the light and new life of the risen One that now (and still) dispels the darkness and death that shrouds our existence. The tallest of candles, the paschal light burns visually throughout the season to signify the exultant reality of what Christians believe about the Easter event and promise it bears for the world.



But just as a person’s religious character is not confined to a church, so the character of religious symbols is not limited to worship. On the contrary, because such symbols evoke a meaningfulness that cannot be communicated by other means, they constitute an important way to express not only one’s belief but also one’s identity. Without such symbols, meaning is lost, and meaningfulness is absent.



Thus, the temporary [loss of symbols at Georgetown University](#) gives rise to the thought that an institution’s religious character is merely fashionable, able to be covered up in different ways for different occasions. Recently, university officials there chose to conceal from any camera’s view the **Christogram** – the letters “IHS” designating the name of Jesus, with a cross extending upward from the center – that adorns the archway above the dais at which President Obama delivered a speech on economics (a message ironically based, in part, on the biblical metaphor of “the house built upon rock”). One effect of this cover-up was to provide a “consistent backdrop” to the presidential speech; the other was to hide away the religious “identity” of the place, for those letters are central to the seal of the Society of Jesus, the Catholic religious order who founded the university.

Which effect was primarily intended, and whose initiative led to the iconoclastic decision, have been matters of debate. But whether it was sought by the White House or offered by the university, the symbolic message was evident – nothing religious should be considered coterminous with political posturing.

Some may brush this aside, as even one Jesuit did when he opined that it was more about “camera quality” and “communications strategy” than theology. But if Ricoeur is right, a new thought arises from the symbolism of covering one’s religious identity in what looked like a black cloth.
