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This article was originally published as:
McCarthy, A. (2007). Blessing of Hands: a sacramental experience. *Pastoral Liturgy, 38* (1), 9-12.

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Blessing of Hands: a sacramental experience

By Angela McCarthy

Busy universities are not usually places where one can easily find the sacred but, for a private Catholic university, special celebrations can lead to a sacramental experience. Such is the case at the University of Notre Dame (Fremantle campus) where the Blessing of Hands offers a sacramental experience to everyone who would like to participate. "Health is an important human value, and so in traditional religious cultures when health is lost there are always ritual means that attempt to restore it".[1] While modern medicine has gone beyond using ritual means of healing as principal care, there is still a strong value in healing rituals as they express the human value of life and health. The Blessing of Hands affirms the value of health and the value of the students and staff involved in the healing professions.

The ceremony was developed soon after the opening of the School of Nursing in 2000. A nursing degree was a priority for the University and this particular course, through its inaugural leader Professor Doreen McCarthy, centred on producing professional nurses who would have suitable academic background, extensive practical experience and an attitude founded on the principal of "soft hands, caring hands". Initially it was celebrated on Florence Nightingale's birthday, 12 May, as this is also International Nurses' Day and was an appropriate time to bring together supportive nurses from the wider professional community as well as the students and staff to bless their hands in a special way.

In the following years the University developed schools in health sciences, physiotherapy and medicine and they have since been invited to join the celebration so it is no longer tied to May 12 but is open to a much wider cohort of staff, students,

families and guests. It has made an impact on the life of the university which is perhaps due to it being a way of accessing the sacred through a ritual that is comfortable and inclusive. Following this year's celebration in May, one student who had no religious connection said that the experience was "uplifting", bringing her into contact with something that was beyond the ordinary. Similarly, another student said that it made her "feel good" about what she was studying and hoping to achieve professionally.

To take what seems to be mundane and stressful and turn it into a shared experience that deepens life's meaning is what is meant by "sacramental living".[2] To bring members of the university community to such a place is a worthwhile and authentic action that brings a sacramental experience to a wide range of people and heightens the value of their healing action. By presenting such an experience through a Liturgy of the Word, the reality of Jesus' presence in the priest, the Word and the assembly[3] becomes a human encounter with Jesus as "the sacrament of the encounter with God".[4] Such encounters will necessarily have an impact in various ways on the vast variety of people who attend this liturgy. All of them however, attend with a common heart. They are committed to their healing practice through their professions and they are open to encountering the sacred in this particular time and place. As Schillebeeckx points out, on Christ's side "the possibility of human encounter is positively established. Human encounter, however, calls for mutual availability"[5] and in this particular instance, the university community makes a sacred time and place available for such an experience within a ritual celebration.

In *Sacraments and Sacramentality*, Cooke explains that when the celebration involves ritual that is agreed upon by those involved, and explained where necessary to those unfamiliar, the shared experience forms a common understanding that then enriches

those gathered and gives a deeper level of meaning to their familiar tasks. He further points out that in ritual we are doing something together that is meaningful and sharing inherited wisdom about the meaning of life. [6] Such is the capacity of ritual to meet the spiritual needs of people particularly when it involves "the actual life experience of the people who are celebrating".[7]

> Characterizing liturgy as sacramental symbolic activity is to say that the people participating in the ritual acts are in their very activity also participating in the ultimate reality they signify, namely salvation through forgiveness and communion with the risen and glorified Jesus.[8]

The choice of symbols, around which the liturgy for the blessing of hands is formed, is of real importance. Symbols have the power to "touch our imaginations, emotions, desires, and loves"[9] and the "memory and meaning of Jesus' saving work are embodied in these earthly realities".[10] So, in the experience of the ritual of the blessing of hands, the symbols chosen had to be accessible and resonate with each participant. Three were chosen: the Word, light and oil.

Words are basic to human communication. Even our formation of ideas is based on our formulation of language symbols and our communications with all others is dependent to some extent on words. In the Christian sense, the Word, the utterance of God[11] is essential to liturgy. The ritual must include some sharing of the inherited wisdom that is alive in the community, and in the particular Christian sense it is Christ, alive and present through the Word. In a Christian liturgical sense, the Word proclaimed is "always, then, a living, active word through the power of the Holy Spirit. It expresses the Father's love that never fails in its effectiveness toward us".[12] The reading of the Word, and the homiletic interpretation that follows, present to the assembly the living and life-giving capacity of Scripture to form those gathered as one in Christ.

Other forms of words are used within the Blessing of Hands. Words are used in the ritual act and, following the conclusion of the liturgy, an inspirational speaker involved in one of the healing professions gives their own form of inherited and learned wisdom. While in contrast to the specialised ritual acts involved in the blessing, the secular reflection makes an important connection to the real world of experience for those gathered. A most memorable address was given by Dr Fiona Woods during her year of being Australian of the Year. She spoke of her work, her faith, her commitment to the best possible care of her burns patients (where she uses ground-breaking technologies) and the importance of family and fitness of the whole person in maintaining such a strenuous regime. The combination of personal entry into the religious world for the blessing and then the motivation of an inspirational personality were very successful.

The use of words within the ritual context is entirely different. Words used in these moments do not actually teach or tell us anything we do not know but they combine with the action to allow "the participants to come to a more profound understanding of the meaning of the actions they are performing. Thus text and ritual performance are mutually and circularly dependent for their intelligibility".[13] The words of blessing and the ritual exchanges of words between presider and assembly perform a function of bringing those gathered from a secular context into a sacred place and moment. For example, the words of introduction and greeting alert the participants that they are entering into something that is "fundamentally different from what has come before".[14]

The symbol of light, as expressed through the lighting of candles, is a symbol that is used widely in Australian culture. Candlelight gatherings occurred in times of immense distress such as the Bali bombings and the Port Arthur massacre. Candlelight is seen to

be conducive to expressions of love and intimacy. Candles are associated with Christmas celebrations even where they are not closely linked with religious expression. Birthday cakes would be less recognisable without candles. For Christians, candles are the symbol of Christ as the light of the world and in this sense a candle is included in the stained glass windows of the university chapel along with other symbols of our place and nature.

The symbol of oil is familiar and accessible, particularly to those involved in the healing professions. Athletes are rubbed down with oil, oil is used for massaging sore muscles by many health professionals, ingesting oils of varying kinds is considered necessary for good bodily health as well as mental health and the capacity to learn. For Christians, the use of oil in healing comes from the earliest accounts, "They cast out many demons, and anointed with oil many who were sick and cured them" (Mark 6:13). In Mark's gospel this refers to the missioning of the twelve, sent out by Jesus with his authority to cleanse and heal. There are accounts in Matthew (26:6-13), Mark 14:3-9) and John (12:1-8) of Jesus being anointed with a special ointment called nard. Nard is an ointment that was extracted from a Himalayan plant and then imported into Palestine and therefore was very expensive. From the roots and stems of the plant aromatic oil was extracted that was used as a cosmetic and perfume.[15] In each account, Jesus speaks of this anointing as being in preparation for his burial and is pleased with the service given to him by the woman concerned.

To further enrich the celebration, the symbolic nature of procession, the action of blessing and the powerful symbol of music were also employed to bring the ritual of the Blessing of Hands to a desired richness. In every action "human beings symbolize

what they are" and when people do things they have not done before, or do something better than before, they are transcending themselves and are open to the gift of grace from God.[16] Such is the richness of experience and expression in the Blessing of Hands.

The opening procession for the Blessing of Hands includes a substantial number of people as it expresses the important elements of the ritual and engages representatives of those gathered from the various schools to become one in the action. In many instances, people have become passive in major celebrations but action is a necessary component of ritual. The entrance procession is a ritual activity that is symbolic in itself as the "activity takes the form of an action done with the symbols".[17] The three schools of Medicine, Health Sciences and Nursing form processional groups of four candle bearers and four oil bearers who process to the centre and place their candles and oil bowls on the prepared focus structure. The final group is lead by an incense bearer who circuitously traverses the central liturgical space to sanctify the space and alert the senses to the sacred nature of the event in a large assembly area within the university. Two further candle bearers come before the person bearing the Word, followed by the presider who arrives at the altar of the Word after the area has been incensed, the oil and candles in place, and the Word and candles placed on the altar. The sign of the cross opens the celebration for all to become present to the mystery of salvation in Christ.[18]

The second procession occurs when all the assembly come forward to have their hands blessed. The action of moving together in procession is inclusive as the entire assembly is involved. The anointers stand in a circle around the central focus facing out to the assembly who move in circles from their place to the place of anointing and then back

again. The circular motion of the movement, as in ancient circle dances, strengthens the ritual understanding of community and expresses the ontological nature of the symbolism and its inclusiveness.

The third procession concludes the entire celebration and as such, the ritual action removes the principal symbols of Word, light and oil and signifies to the assembly that the sacramental action is now over and the difference made through contact with the sacred can be carried into the earthly reality.

Blessings have, in many ways, lost their significance in modern life. This is to our detriment as blessings offer a way of connecting with deeper understandings of human interaction and the place of the sacred in each of those actions.

> A keen awareness of, and greater familiarity with blessing and thanksgiving, can vivify and orientate Christian life and faith. [Such an] understanding will help to form the heart of the individual, and contribute to the sacrifice of praise which God's people are called to offer.[19]

Blessings are most accessible if they are rooted in daily life and become in a sense habitual. Music can shape this habit and bring it to expression by rooting it in the memory of those involved. A blessing that is sung often in daily life is easily remembered and then placed in the memory for life. The influence of the Second Vatican Council produced a *Book of Blessings* in 1985 which has been further developed by individual conferences of Bishops throughout the world. Blessings "refer first and foremost to God, whose majesty and goodness they extol, and, since they indicate the communication of God's favour, they also involve human beings, whom he governs and in his providence protects."[20] This more recent understanding of blessings takes away all thoughts of magic and superstition and places the focus totally on the

graciousness of God. In the Blessing of Hands, the blessing is through the presence of Jesus Christ and the gift of the Holy Spirit and is ritually expressed as the presider blesses the oils before they are used in the ritual action.

The words, “In Jesus’ name bring healing to those who suffer” are said as the staff and student representatives anoint the palms of the hands presented to them by the assembly. The oil used is lavender oil which has overtones of healing from other contexts and heightens the senses as the blessing takes place. The strong scent remains on the hands for some time and so each participant takes the physical and spiritual memory with them through the rest of the day.

Music is a further powerful symbol that is engaged in this ritual. It is a “powerful means of interpersonal, community-forming communication that has an innately ritual character”.[21] Music accompanies the processions, the anointing and proclaims the psalm and alleluia verse. As declared in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, the “liturgical service takes on a nobler aspect when the rites are celebrated with singing, the sacred ministers take their parts in them, and the faithful actively participate”.[22] The choice of music for the Blessing of Hands needs to be accessible for the assembly and so the music has a youthful flavour with student musicians from the three schools involved in the preparation and presentation.

The Blessing of Hands brings members of the university community to a place that is of value, that is sacred, and that brings an authentic sacramental nature into the reality of the work of the university in the area of health. The reality of Jesus’ presence is affirmed and the work of the community given back to God, a truly sacramental action.

[1] Joseph Martos, *Doors to the sacred,* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2001), 13.
[2] Mary C. Grey, *The search of the sacred,* (Wheathamstead: Anthony Clarke, 1983), 15.
[3] The Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium,* (1963), 7.
[4] Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the sacrament of the encounter with God,* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 1963), 15.
[5] ibid, 43.
[6] Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and sacramentality,* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004), 41.
[7] Ibid, 42.
[8] Mary Collins, 'Liturgy', *The new dictionary of theology,* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 595.
[9] Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and sacramentality,* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2004), 46.
[10] Mary Collins, 'Liturgy', *The new dictionary of theology,* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 595.
[11] John 1:1
[12] *Lectionary for Mass: Introduction,* (1981), 4.
[13] Joseph J. Schaller, 'Performative language theory', *Worship 62,* no. 05, (2006), 420.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Thomas L. Strong, *'Nard', Eerdman's Dictionary of the Bible,* (Cambridge, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000), 948.
[16] Joseph Martos, *Doors to the sacred,* (Liguori, Missouri: Liguori/Triumph, 2001), 112.
[17] Chris Harris, *Creating relevant rituals,* (Newtown, NSW: E.J. Dwyer, 1992), 33.
[18] Mary Collins, 'Liturgy', *The new dictionary of theology,* (Dublin: Gill and Macmillan, 1987), 595.
[19] Christopher Willcock, 'Everyday blessings: the heart's song, the Church's praise', *Slattery Lecture,* (UNDA, Fremantle, 2006).
[20] 'Book of blessings: general introduction', *The liturgy documents,* (Chicago, Liturgy Training Publications, 1999), 354.
[21] Anthony Ruff, *Sacred music and liturgical reform,* (Chicago: HillenbrandBooks, 2007), 7.
[22] Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium,* (Vatican City: 1963), 113.