Introduction

In late December 2009 on a sunny Florida afternoon, my eighty-two-year-old mother stepped across my sister's kitchen, caught her foot on the hem of her pink bathrobe, and fell onto the ceramic tile floor. She landed with sufficient force to break her right hip instantly, the hip opposite the one she had broken ten years earlier and that had been successfully repaired.

This second break was much worse than the first. The intervening decade had weakened my mother's body and, truth be told, her mind. A lifelong habit of smoking had led to COPD (chronic obstructive pulmonary disease), and a similarly long habit of excessive drinking had rendered her major organs vulnerable. This accident, as well as the surgery that might have saved a healthier person, would prove catastrophic in her weakened condition. So began the steady, inexorable disintegration of my mother's living body, which would conclude with her death exactly forty-eight days later, on February 1, 2010.

In the course of those forty-eight days, my siblings and I were drawn repeatedly from the far-flung places we lived

(New York, Philadelphia, Colorado) to my mother's side like magnets to steel. Each time we landed and made our way to our mother's bedside, we found ourselves encountering a new stage in what we would eventually understand to be her dying. And each time we arrived, we were newly clueless as to how to deal with the latest round of medical complications as well as the increasingly volatile emotional firestorm in which we had been placed dead center.

As I look back on those days, I am struck by the many moment-by-moment decisions we were forced to consider. While I believe that many of the choices we made, words we said, and actions we took were preceded by a process of careful thought and reasoning, I am also aware of the fact that many of these decisions were made by heart rather than by mind. We were wandering through strange terrain, and while there were occasional signposts suggesting a direction we might take, there also seemed to be signposts pointing in precisely the opposite direction.

We knew we were not in control of the large-scale medical events that were befalling our mother, so perhaps it seems natural that we found ourselves trying to exercise control in smaller, though no less significant, procedures. As the doctors and nurses made their regular rounds, introducing new pieces of alarming information, we went about the business of caring for our mother—activities that ranged from simply sitting by her side to feeding her and amusing her, always trying to keep her mind off what lay beyond our understanding. Quite unconsciously, we devised rituals, methods of dealing with overwhelming difficulty, which were rooted in sacramental practices we had learned as children in a modestly observant Catholic family.

My Epiphany

In one of his essays, Catholic fiction writer Andre Dubus describes in loving detail the ordinary process of making sandwiches for his school-age daughters. At the time he wrote the essay, Dubus was wheelchair bound—the result of a roadside accident—and his limited range of motion required him to develop routine and sometimes elaborate methods for accomplishing simple tasks.

This element of difficulty that had been introduced into his daily life provided Dubus with a new vantage point from which to appreciate the effort that goes into ordinary actions. He sees them in terms of the practical ends they accomplish, but the extended duration and deliberateness of his method also allows him and his readers to see a greater meaning behind them. Thus, it strikes us as both wonderful and true when we arrive, along with Dubus, at the remarkable discovery that this daily task of feeding his children is a kind of sacrament: "A sacrament is an outward sign of God's love, they taught me when I was a boy, and in the Catholic Church there are seven. But, no, I say, for the Church is catholic, the world is catholic, and there are seven times seventy sacraments, to infinity."[1]

As a literature professor and longtime admirer of Dubus's writing, I had read, believed, and shared these words with my students for years. But during the forty-eight days in which I was engaged in the ordinary tasks of daily care for a dependent parent, I was able to *feel* the truth of what had been merely an intellectual understanding.

The Catholic Imagination and the Sacraments in Everyday Life

Most of us live our daily lives immersed in the ordinary world. Beset by many tasks and responsibilities, we work to accomplish what we can, and we often do this without a great deal of thought or deliberation. These daily habits enable us to function reasonably well, practically speaking, but they can also blind us to the extraordinary nature of our own lives.

In his wonderful book *The Catholic Imagination*, sociologist and Catholic priest Andrew Greeley reminds his readers that Catholic tradition offers human beings a more expansive vision of life:

> Catholics live in an enchanted world, a world of statues and holy water, stained glass and votive candles, saints and religious medals, rosary beads and holy pictures. But these Catholic paraphernalia are mere hints of a deeper and more pervasive religious sensibility which inclines Catholics to see the holy lurking in creation. As Catholics, we find our houses and our world haunted by a sense that the objects, events, and persons of daily life are revelations of grace.[2]

Greeley's observation enables us to see that the world in any given moment is, in and of itself, a sacrament—that is, a revelation of the presence of God. Holy objects or "sacramentals" hint at this presence of the divine in the ordinary, but an imaginative engagement of the world enlarges our ability to see that all objects are potentially holy—or "sacramentals"—as are all human activities and, most important, all human beings.

This book is an account of my family's gradual discovery of this sacramental vision as we cared for our ailing mother. My hope is that readers who find themselves in a situation

similar to ours will discover the grace that can be, at times, difficult to find. In addition, the book is meant to suggest that this vision is available to us in any number of circumstances. We are all travelers, making our journey through the landscape of our lives. If we are attentive to the road we are walking, we become aware of that landscape as one that is full of signs and symbols, each of them pointing to a reality that lies beyond our limited vision.

Seen this way, every aspect of the stories of our lives becomes invested with meaning and importance—our childhood and upbringing, our parents and siblings, our education, our friends, our relationships to our spouses, our raising of our children, our life's work, our strengths and accomplishments, and our limitations and failures. What seems ordinary is not ordinary at all. Everything is, to use Greeley's term, "enchanted," charged with significance, and available to us as a manifestation of divine presence in our daily lives.

Perhaps I can illustrate some of the ways in which the seemingly simplest of actions can become charged with meaning when seen through the eyes of the sacramental imagination.

The Sacrament of Pie

The Latin word *sacramentum* is often translated as a "sign of the sacred." In the Catholic Church, sacraments are ceremonies that direct our attention toward the sacred by means of the mundane, toward the spiritual by means of the physical, toward the eternal by means of the transient. The priest uses bread and wine to signify (and, in Church teaching, through the mystery of transubstantiation, to *become*) the body and blood of Christ.

Similarly, in Baptism, the pouring of water over the infant's head signifies a ritual cleansing, bathing the child in the waters of life, and also the drowning of the old self and the emergence of the new—a process further signified by the new name the child receives. The words, the actions, and the material substances are all signs, aural and visible presences, of the invisible gift of grace. In addition, sacraments are communal in nature. They require participants and witnesses, effectively drawing us into communion with one another for the purpose of sanctification.

These elements of ritual, of material substances, and of communion were all present in the sacraments we shared with our mother. The rites we devised as we cared for her served a practical function—feeding her, keeping her spirits up, clothing and grooming her body—but they also served a transcendent one. They were, indeed, outward signs of invisible grace as well as mute testaments to the love we shared with one another—a human, familial love that is, ultimately, an expression of divine love. I was struck by this, even as we were performing these rituals in the ICU, in the hospital, in the nursing home and, finally, in her hospice room.

At the same time, I was struck by the humble and everyday nature of the materials we employed—not bread and wine, but pie and Ensure, and not chrism oil, but nail polish and scissors. Even so, the ordinariness of these substances seemed to underscore the deep significance of the actions we were engaged in.

A few weeks after her fall, my mother had rallied enough to undergo surgery and was moved to a nursing facility. This was a brief, hopeful period, a relief from the incessant worry. Each day and hour had its attendant rituals, but the one she enjoyed most was the evening visit. Nightfall occasioned the

bringing of an offering (most often in the form of a store-bought Key lime pie). We would process into the room, announce the flavor of the pie, ceremoniously remove the clear plastic cover, cut a generous slice, place it on a plate, and feed it to my mother. She, in turn, would savor each bite, chewing the crust with some difficulty (since her dentures had been removed), uttering small, childish cries of delight, and then pronouncing how "*dee-LI-cious*" it was. She would wash it down with a sip from the pint-sized carton of Ensure, the fortified milk she was given to drink. We would repeat the feeding, receiving exactly the same response from her, and repeat the sip, until the first piece was consumed. And then we would cut another slice.

I was astonished, both then and now, by the force with which it hit me: this ritual was Eucharist by another name. Here I was, a child feeding my mother, our role reversal reminding me of the innumerable meals she had fed me in the course of my life, beginning with my life in utero and continuing into my adulthood. We had come full circle in the round of life we had led, and this ritual served to circumscribe the sacred, mysterious relationship between mother and child. It gestured toward our shared past even as it unfolded in the present moment. In addition, it pointed to the future as I realized that I, too, would be in her position one day, having my own children feed me.

It was all this and more. True, this action encompassed and indicated our common humanity (we all need to eat to live) and our common dependence upon one another, but it also gestured toward a greater, transcendent hunger that needs filling in the here and now. Our ordinary communion seemed a version of the divine Communion we celebrate at Mass, food for the body and the soul that originates in the infinite

generosity of a God who came to live among us and who continually gives himself to us in order that we might have life.

There is something about the nearness of death that triggers such glimpses into the nature of life. Small actions that might be seen as burdensome, repetitive, and numbingly boring can suddenly become charged with mystery, freighted with history, and full of meaning we feel but find difficult to explain. Such epiphanies redeem the actions themselves but, more important, they serve to redeem the often fraught and fractured relationships between the people enacting these ordinary sacraments. Here, through the agency of pie, I was offering my mother everything I had unconsciously withheld from her for years: understanding, compassion, forgiveness and, yes, even love. In response to my offerings, her mantra of “delicious” served as her “Amen” and sounded to me like a series of acknowledgments: *I know*; *Thank you*; *I forgive you*; and, most moving of all, *I’ve always loved you*.

And so our ordinary Eucharist also served the purpose of another sacrament, an enacting of Confession, which was greeted with forgiveness and mutual absolution. My forgiveness of my mother (she had not been the best) entailed my forgiveness of myself for my own shortcomings as a daughter (I had not been the best). As for my mother, in her newfound simplicity of mind and heart, enjoying her pie received at the hands of her child, she had been miraculously relieved of any sense of guilt, resentment, or anger. In the face of extremity, all was forgiven.

These meals proved to be among her last, and so they proved to be mortal blessings: “mortal” in the sense that they do not—cannot—last, “blessings” in the sense that they impart benediction on both giver and receiver.

As Andre Dubus points out in "On Charon's Wharf," another of his essays, "we are all terminally ill."[3] All of us are engaged in the inevitable march toward our own mortality. But these sacramental moments enable us to pause in that march, to offer a gesture of love wherein we give ourselves away and thereby acquiesce to our common fragility and humanity. And this is, strangely, cause for both sadness and joy.

"Seven Times Seventy Sacraments, to Infinity"

In this book, I've set out to delineate the sacraments we take and the sacraments we make—placing the familiar ones we (as Catholics) receive in the course of our life in the Church beside the makeshift sacramental practices that we create in extreme circumstance. This sacramental attention and invention took a variety of forms in the course of the forty-eight days of my mother's illness; in the course of the funeral and burial ceremonies we planned and observed; and also in the days, weeks, and months of mourning that ensued.

This brief meditation on the "Sacrament of Pie" serves as an example of the many ways in which my family's attention to the illness, decline, death, and mourning of my mother took on the quality of sacrament. We perceived in these experiences signs of that enchanted world Fr. Greeley speaks of wherein every action takes on significance that is both local and transcendent. As the quotation from Dubus's essay suggests, there are many more of these sacraments, both small and large, than can be counted, so my goal is not so much to be exhaustive but, rather, to be suggestive of the possibilities. In addition, it is my hope that these specific moments in my family's lives, our makeshift sacramental practices, will enable the reader to see the many invitations to sacramental practice

in his or her daily life, whether in moments of extremity or in moments of relative calm. Thus, the task of caring for an infant (one usually associated with joy) and that of caring for an aging parent (one usually associated with sorrow) might equally serve as occasions for meditation, a source of wisdom, and a goad to gratitude.

The book proceeds chronologically, cast as a series of linked narratives charting the course of my mother's final illness and the parallel course of my family's gathering of resources and strength in preparation for her passing. It chronicles her hospitalization, her time in the ICU, her surgery, her (brief) recovery in the nursing facility, and her last hours in hospice care. The final chapter of the book explores the sacramental elements (and lack thereof) of our attention to her cremation, her funeral, and her eventual interment.

Mortal Blessings is about the discovery and unfolding of these sacraments. Each chapter serves as an occasion for meditation on the details and significance of a specific practice and attempts to describe the ways in which each sacrament served and strengthened our family, with implications for all of our lives and situations. One of the discoveries we made during this experience is that engagement in the enchanted or sacramental world brings human beings closer together. Sacrament thrives in and creates community. Readers can likely attest to this discovery in their own lives as well: going through a trial by fire with another human being gives us someone to share the burden with and cements that relationship; we share an experience that is unique, intense, unrepeatable, and holy. This attests to one of many ways in which, paradoxically, suffering itself serves as a sacrament and a vehicle of grace.

Through these pages, the reader will encounter my family's story but also the words and thoughts of a range of voices on

the subject of sacrament. Most of the voices are those of theologians, fiction writers, and poets—some are biblical voices as well. Their words provide precedents, articulations of fresh and sage ways to think about sacramentality—and give us permission to think creatively about it ourselves. The selection of writers is not reflective of a particular agenda; rather, it is a collection of writers who have influenced my own ever-growing understanding of the sacred.

A central challenge of writing this book has been to be as truthful as possible in recounting my family's particular experience of loss. Though we were all afflicted by immense sadness, we are, as a family, characteristically given to humor and irony. In part, this is because our family was stricken by a series of domestic disasters when we were children. Our father, who was chronically ill, died unexpectedly, widowing my young mother with five children; our eldest brother suffered a brain tumor and nearly died six months later; and a close family friend, a man my mother loved very much, died in a terrible car accident a few years afterward. Scarred as we were by these events, humor helped us to cope then, and it continues to help us cope now. I mention this by way of differentiating between humor that is irreverent and humor that is human and enables us to endure.

At times, the circumstances require me to reveal personal details of our family life (my mother's alcoholism, for example). I do this when necessary and only when it serves the purpose of elucidating the range of possibility for "seven times seventy" sacramental practices. I also include these details as a way of acknowledging that no family is perfect—neither the writer's nor the reader's—and that it is our uniquely human condition to live in a state of imperfection. In fact, amending those imperfections is one of the functions of sacrament.

These rituals of love are a gift, and the practice of them gives us the opportunity to become better people.

Though the actors in this story and the particular details involved are specific to my family, scenarios such as those I recount are unfolding in hospitals, homes, and nursing facilities across the world at this very moment. Ours was—and is—an experience both local and universal and as such, it is meant to be easily recognizable to anyone who has cared for a sick or dying parent.

My hope is that readers who share the difficult and painful experiences associated with the loss of a loved one might find in them the ritual patterns and redemptive qualities of sacrament, that they might derive some solace from the fact that they are not alone, and that they might arrive at a fuller understanding of the powerful and pervasive role ritual and sacramental practice play at key moments in our lives, even (and, perhaps, especially) when we are least aware of it.

Chapter 1

The Sacrament of Speech

In the beginning was the Word . . .
And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us.
—John 1:1, 14

"In the beginning was the Word." This is the celebrated opening line of the Gospel of John. The Word here—or *logos* in Greek—refers to Christ and describes the Son of God as a being who has always coexisted with God, who has no beginning and no end, and who lives beyond and outside of time. Later the gospel tells us that "the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us." The Word did not remain a disembodied power or energy source. (And, if we think about it, this is what ordinary words are.) Instead, the Word became an incarnate being in the world, one who could share in human existence and know birth and death, our sufferings and our joys, our weaknesses and our strengths, firsthand. Thus, the Word reveals and embodies God's presence in the world.

This scripture passage describes the miracle of the Incarnation, and it also reminds us of the primacy of the word or of language. The Bible begins with the story of creation. God proclaimed a set of words, "Let there be light," and there was light. Thus, the world is literally spoken into being. Words are accorded enormous power throughout the Bible. The prophets and patriarchs are given words for God's people to live by, and Jesus frequently quotes these words to his followers, reminding them of the importance of Holy Writ: "'Man shall not live on bread alone, but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Mt 4:4).

Words, then, are a source of creative energy, of revelation and, at times, of destructive power. In addition to being tools that we need in order to think and speak and accomplish ordinary tasks, words constitute a sign for us to read, to pay attention to, and to use with discretion and wisdom in terms of the sacramental vision. Saints know this, as well as sinners. It is no accident that the first directive of the *Rule* of St. Benedict, the handbook Benedict designed for his monks, derived from the book of Proverbs, is to "listen with the ear of your heart."

Words also have a primacy in our own lives as well as in Judeo-Christian religious tradition. For most of us, the first words we hear—whether in utero or after we are born—are spoken to us by our mothers. We learn language from them (hence the term "mother tongue"), we practice speech within the community of our families, and then we go out into the world equipped with a grammar and vocabulary, speech rhythms and intonations, and (if we're fortunate) a sense of language as a powerful instrument necessary for us to live a rich and satisfying life. Our way of speaking identifies us with the clan we come from, with a region, with an ethnic group, and with a social class. Yet our way of speaking is also

highly individualized. No two siblings speak in exactly the same way. Thus, language serves as an oral and aural version of our fingerprint. We all use language in unique and interesting ways, yet we use it, mostly, for the same purpose: to communicate—and thereby to create community—with others. So it makes sense to begin an inquiry into the sacraments we make with the Sacrament of Speech.

The Power of Words

I grew up in a family in which words mattered, and we five children took a particular delight in language as an instrument of power (this is how one gained the upper hand in an argument); a means of getting attention (our household was noisy and frenetic); and a source of delight (we loved jokes, wordplay, prevarication, and myth-making of all kinds).

This facility with words set us apart, in fact, from our more practical parents. The children of Italian immigrants, neither my father nor my mother had more than a high school education, and neither was especially interested in academic pursuits. My father was a factory worker. My mother was a housewife and busy mother, and she also worked evenings and weekends as a waitress. Words aided them in accomplishing the practical tasks associated with their labors and provided them with a means for simple conversation, mostly with and among people they knew well. For them, language was almost entirely an oral and aural experience. By this, I mean that they were not readers; they did not engage the silent, written word very often and therefore didn't share in the experience of inhabiting the multiple worlds of words that reading provides.

In addition, both of my parents were raised in bilingual households. This meant that English was reserved for purely

practical expression. Anything of deeper significance would be conveyed in Italian or in the Sicilian dialect.

My siblings and I were shaped by American culture in a variety of ways. We enjoyed better schooling than my parents had access to and therefore learned to read and write English with greater skill and efficiency. We were exposed to different kinds and modes of speech through the growing presence of television, radio, popular music, and daily communication with people outside of the small circle of immediate family. Our collective world was bigger than that of our parents, in every sense of that word. As a result, we learned early on that speech and language served multiple purposes in multiple settings and circumstances, and we enjoyed adapting our speech to those situations and using words in inventive ways, naturally and unselfconsciously.

Another enormous influence on our sense of language was the experience of growing up Catholic. As a child, I found it interesting that my mother regularly had difficulty spelling and pronouncing everyday words correctly, yet when we went to Mass she could recite the elevated and archaic language of the Creed and the noble poetry of the Our Father without a single glitch. I used to wonder how the woman who would consistently misspell "lettuce" (as "lettis") on a store list could sing the words—and the notes—of "Holy God, We Praise Thy Name" with perfection: "Infinite thy vast domain, / Everlasting is thy reign." I had no idea what those words meant—and I was pretty sure my mother didn't know either—but they succeeded in lifting our minds out of the ordinary and the superficial toward the unseen, transcendent world that lay beyond us.

In such moments, we learned and practiced speech as sacrament. Praying these words and rhythms in unison unleashed,

somehow, a mysterious power. Through the familiar cadences and constructions of words we heard at Baptisms, weddings, funerals and, on a more frequent basis, at the consecration of the Eucharist, we quietly absorbed the Catholic fact that words are efficacious. They enabled us to accomplish serious, consequential things. Words enabled us to confess our iniquity, and they also absolved us from our sins. They turned ordinary bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ and enabled us to partake of divinity. They snatched souls from limbo and set them on a course toward heaven. They invited the Holy Spirit to inhabit our bodies and our souls. They turned ordinary men into priests and ordinary women into nuns. Through their strange magic, they enabled two people to become one, so thoroughly united that the two could not be put asunder.

If words had so much power in church, our post–Vatican II minds reasoned, they must retain some of that power beyond the church walls. Just as God is everywhere (as we learned in after-school catechism class), so is the Word.

This Catholic attitude toward language enabled us, even as children, to see words as potentially powerful and efficacious in everyday life. Not that we were always conscious and respectful of that power—we abused words along with everyone else, often outrageously so. (Name-calling was a favorite sport, infinitely preferable to physical fighting. A well-chosen name could strike home as a mere fist to the face could not.) But we were also sensitive to sound and took special note of the way people spoke, noticing their accents and tonalities and their odd expressions. Somehow we knew that the way a person spoke was deeply revelatory of who he or she was. You could “read” a person’s heart by listening. Perhaps this is