Sacramental moments are experiences of the loving and creative presence of the Spirit. Creation flows from divine vision and is the locus of the human experience of divine presence. People perceive signs of the Spirit in creation, signs that might or might not be acknowledged but which nonetheless link innermost human being with divine Being. People have moments of engagement with the Spirit when they are open to the loving and creative presence of the Spirit in evolutionary creation.

In Christian churches, sacraments traditionally have been religious rituals, mediated by a member of the clergy in a dedicated, human-constructed sacred space, which are visible signs or symbols of an invisible experience of God’s ‘grace’—divine presence expressed in relational love—in significant life moments. Recently, pristine places also have come to be viewed as sacramental because they reveal the Spirit’s loving creativity in their biodiversity, textured topography, and provision of food, water and shelter for the community of life.

The term “sacrament” in the Catholic Church usually is applied to seven church rituals, presided over by a priest in a church building. These rituals, derived from teachings and actions of Jesus, were formalized by the Council of Trent (1547-1563). There have been exceptions to this reserved use of the term. For example, the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* called the Church a “sacrament”; and Pope Paul VI stated that “the poor are a sacrament of Christ,” a theological expression of the teaching of Jesus in the Last Judgment story in Matthew’s gospel (25:31-46).

In 1991 the U.S. bishops, in their national pastoral letter *Renewing the Earth*, said that creation as a whole is sacramental. They declared that “The Christian vision of a sacramental
universe—a world that discloses the Creator’s presence by visible and tangible signs—can contribute to making the earth a home for the human family once again.” The bishops of Alberta, Canada, in their 1998 pastoral letter Celebrate Life: Care for Creation, taught “Catholics see creation in a sacramental way. The abundance and beauty of God’s creation reveals to us something of the generosity of the Creator. God is present and speaks in the dynamic life forces of our universe and planet as well as in our own lives. Respect for life needs to include all creation.” These church teachings state that the whole of creation can be sacramental for the person of faith, revealing God’s grace-offering presence and life-conferring productivity. The sacramental universe teaching has scriptural bases in passages such as Wisdom 13:5: “from the greatness and beauty of created things their original author, by analogy, is seen”; and Acts 17:28: “in God we live and move and have our being.”

A sacramental place is naturally a commons: a home shared by all the members of the community of life. In it, their food and habitat needs are integrated, their competitive needs are balanced, their relationships are interdependent, and their associations are consciously or unconsciously collaborative. The commons is the locus of engagement of the biotic and abiotic communities, internally in their respective modes of being and engagement and externally in their interaction with each other. The commons is the place in which dynamic natural history evolves, diversifies and complexifies, and the base from which cultural history develops in all its intricacy.

In the bible, human property in land and goods is part of a human commons (Acts 2:44 describes how the early Christian community “had all things in common”), which is to provide for human needs. In a complementary way, the Earth is a commons: shared space and the source of life-providing goods for all creatures. The Earth commons, then, is not intended solely for humans’ use and enjoyment, although as part of the biotic community they share in its benefits; it is being created
to provide for all creatures as they live related to and dependent on each other in complex ecosystems.

The *sacramental commons* is creation seen as the locus of the interactive presence and caring compassion of the Spirit. It implies that people are called to integrate the spiritual meaning of ‘sacramental’ and the social meaning of ‘commons’ and engage in concrete efforts to restore and conserve ecosystems: to care about and care for creation as a whole, and to care about and for the members of the biotic community.

The “sacramental universe” becomes localized in the “sacramental commons” when Creator Spirit and created spirits consciously engage each other in sacred space, which is every place in creation. People in their spiritual center experience sacramental moments in sacramental places of a sacramental commons in the sacramental universe. As “sacrament,” a place at special moments is revelatory of God-immanent; as “commons,” a place at all moments is a sign of the creativity of God-transcendent, while simultaneously providing the natural goods necessary for the well-being of the community of all life. In acknowledging a “sacramental commons,” people express an appreciation of the sacredness, integrity, and life-sustaining qualities of creation.

Ethical conduct and ecological consequences flow from sacramental understandings of cosmos and commons. Christians who acknowledge the creative, communicating and community-creating immanence of the Spirit in creation, recognizing thereby the revelatory power of creation as a whole and of the biotic community within it, treat Earth and Earth’s inhabitants with reverence and respect. In understanding that the Spirit intends that Earth’s goods meet the needs of all Earth’s creatures, they avoid consumerism and exploitation. In viewing creation holistically, they act responsibly toward those who are strangers in space, time and species, not solely the human “neighbors” who have the most noticeable claim on their concern, but also otherkind and pristine
nature that comprise the variant forms of the community of creation ever emerging from the creative power and loving presence of the Spirit. Within this consciousness, generational and intergenerational responsibility are fostered, the limits on Earth’s livable space, productive places, and available goods are respected, and space, places and goods are shared equitably.

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Further Reading

