‘Quid est sacramentum?: On the Visual Representation of Sacred Mysteries in Early Modern Europe and the Americas, 1400-1700’

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How and why were the mysteries of faith and, in particular, sacramental mysteries construed as amenable to processes of representation and figuration capable of engaging mortal eyes, minds, and hearts? Mysteries by their very nature appeal to the spirit, rather than to sense or reason, and operate beyond the scope of the human faculties, and yet the visual arts were seen as legitimate vehicles for the dissemination of these mysteries and for prompting reflection upon them. Much debated in the sixteenth century, the Latin term sacramentum (gospel revelation) appertains to God-given truths that transcend mere human intelligence. The primary source of such truths is scriptural, and as such, they may be approached exegetically, but only partially: conveyed by the Spirit, these sacramentum, to the extent they can be known, are disclosed by faith and revealed rather than fully cognized. The same term, in an allied meaning, also refers to sacraments such as Baptism; in this sense, it denotes the sacred rites by which the faithful are made party to the mystery of salvation, efficient grace is vouchsafed, and the conferral of grace represented to spiritual eyes. The complementary term mysterium (divine mystery) was sometimes specifically applied to the celebration of the Eucharist, but more generally, it too signifies a divine truth revealed by the Spirit and ultimately discernible by faith.

For visual artists, these conceptions of sacramentum and mysterium posed questions as basic as they were pressing: how are gospel revelations and divine mysteries to be portrayed; more specifically, how is their transcendent character to be visualized, given the constraints of mimetic representation. It is surprising to discover that questions such as these were considered so significant that they regularly occur not just in art treatises but even at the level of catechetical instruction: the elementary quaeestio, ‘What is a sacrament?’, was seen to raise issues and concerns about the nature of visual representation and interpretation.