

At the Heart of the Liturgy

Edited by
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and
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Foreword by
Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP

At the Heart of the Liturgy

Conversations with Nathan D. Mitchell's
"Amen Corners," 1991–2012

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In Memoriam
R. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB
(1930–2013)

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Foreword

At the heart of the liturgy is the God of Love, poured out in Spirit and Word, who prepares a banquet where strangers and sinners—which is to say, all of us—are welcome. At the heart of liturgy is the God of compassion who nurtures us at her own breast. At the heart of liturgy is the God who sends us forth to testify to what we have seen and heard, to become what we eat, to be a blessing in and for God's beloved and broken world.

For over two decades, Nathan Mitchell offered his own testimony to that mystery in his "Amen Corners" in *Worship*. Although this book is not a complete collection of those poetic and prophetic essays, it offers a welcome sampling of a feature readers eagerly anticipated. We knew that we would find trustworthy historical and theological scholarship, as well as some hidden treasures. Likewise, we expected to find an assessment of the current state of a question which reframed past insights and opened up future possibilities. We knew, too, that we were in for a literary treat. Nathan would "tell the truth, but tell it slant" (Emily Dickinson).

With the soul of poet himself, Nathan was always on the lookout for the turn of phrase, the image, stanza, or metaphor from other classic wordsmiths that could capture the liturgical insight he wanted to explore. His essay on women and worship became "A 'Mansion' for the Rat." T.S. Eliot's reminder that "in my beginning is my end" persuaded readers to attend to details of liturgical history and complex philosophical distinctions, both medieval and postmodern. Church architecture became "the poetics of space" and the "geometry of prayer." Nathan's final column gathers images from sources as diverse as Zora Neale Hurston, Gerard Manley Hopkins, T.S. Eliot, Marge Piercy, Robert Farrar Capon, Wallace Stevens, Li-Young Lee, Flannery O'Connor, and Ellis Peters, among others. But Nathan wove the threads of their insights

into his own tapestry, in this case a farewell eucharistic litany which draws the readers' attention back to the heart of liturgy: "We come to you, God, with praise and thanksgiving."

The introductions to each section of this volume, written by a new generation of liturgical scholars, clearly demonstrate that Nathan's students became apprentices in that same art. Instead of repeating or explaining Nathan's insights, yet clearly inspired by them, his former students whom he proudly claims as colleagues now, voice their own. Nathan opened doors and pointed to ways forward. He led expeditions into history and mystery with maps that had been discarded by others or that remained unfinished. In their own creative scholarship his companions have continued the journey, but they have also departed from the familiar trails and begun to explore new pathways of their own.

Nothing could delight a true teacher more. As Nathan's colleague, I witnessed his skills as a mentor in the classroom, a member of examination boards, and the director of dissertations. At times I marveled as he performed the academic version of the wisdom Catherine of Siena advocates in her *Dialogue*: "snatch the rose from between the thorns." Students treasured his insights in the classroom, but he treasured theirs even more. He showed a way forward in a writing project with a well-placed question in the margins of a text. During an examination process others found tedious, there was genuine delight on Nathan's face when students grasped something they had misunderstood, responded in a way that moved beyond his expectations, or offered an astute critique.

The fruits of some of those initial insights are evident in this volume, beginning with Kimberly Belcher's reflections on "the flesh as the hinge of salvation" in ways that neither Nathan nor Tertullian could have imagined. Likewise, Joël Schmidt exercises his own creative imagination in highlighting how effective preaching generates new possibilities of enfleshing the word of God in the world. Anne McGowan draws on a surprising discovery in an unfamiliar pastoral setting to show how the Spirit enables imperfect communities to "make room and make welcome." Celebrating all forms of genuine beauty as "portals to transcendence," Clare Johnson focuses on the subversive manifestation of God's beauty in

the icon of the crucified one who calls us to recognize, and respond to, the image of God in the lost and the least. Katharine Harmon illustrates that “real presence is not only the gift but also the goal and work of Eucharist” through stories drawn from her original research on women’s roles in the liturgical movement prior to Vatican II. Melanie Ross summons Anne Tyler and Wendell Berry, among others, to join Nathan in celebrating the grace of unconditional forgiveness and second chances, a gift which is at the same time a charge to every Christian gathering.

Readers of this volume will give thanks not only for Nathan’s creative scholarship, pastoral commitment, and love of liturgy, all of which are reflected in his final hymn of praise and thanks, but also for the voice lessons he offered to this chorus of creative scholars. Together they celebrate that at the heart of liturgy is the heart of God.

Mary Catherine Hilkert, OP
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Introduction

My first encounter with Nathan D. Mitchell's scholarly work occurred not in conjunction with "The Amen Corner," which he composed for each issue of *Worship* from 1991 through 2012, but actually several years before that. Like many of us in the field of liturgical studies, my first encounter was with Nathan's still influential and widely read *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass*,¹ which he had completed in 1981 for a publication in 1982. I read *Cult and Controversy* for the first time as a Masters student in liturgical studies at Saint John's School of Theology, Collegeville, Minnesota, immediately after its publication. It was at that time also where R. Kevin Seasoltz, OSB (+2013), who was to become the editor of *Worship* over those same many years, suggested to me Nathan's essay, "The Once and Future Child: Toward a Theology of Childhood,"² something no one else was thinking about at the time, for a research project I was doing on the rites for infant baptism.

From those initial encounters with Nathan's work it has, of course, been a great pleasure over the years in my own academic development and career not only to continue reading his erudite insights into everything liturgical, from baptism and confirmation, Eucharist and ministry, language and catholic inclusivity, all the way to ethics, ecumenism, and eschatology, but to learn from him directly as a dear colleague in the Department of Theology at the University of Notre Dame for the past several years.

¹ Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy: The Worship of the Eucharist Outside Mass* (New York: Pueblo, 1982).

² Nathan Mitchell, "The Once and Future Child: Toward a Theology of Childhood," *Living Light* 12 (1975): 423-37.

All of us I am sure have our particular favorite Nathan quotes, those that would make a “Nathan’s Greatest Hits” collection. Those I have found to be particularly helpful and informative for my own teaching and scholarship fall generally into four areas: (1) the meaning of liturgy; (2) the relationship between liturgy and theology; (3) liturgical history and its implications, the largest of these four, given the nature of my own work; and (4) liturgy and ethics or justice. In each of these, however, it is in fact difficult to separate his words into such distinct categories since there is a great deal of overlapping between them, a testimony to Nathan’s own expertise in synthesis.

(1) *The Meaning of Liturgy*

As an important corrective to the popular notion one still all too frequently encounters about the meaning of liturgy as “work of the people” or “people’s work,” a true-enough, though extremely limited, definition, Nathan juxtaposes the following, what might be called a “Benedictine,” definition, which underscores that the *work* of liturgy is primarily *God’s*. He writes:

Liturgy is God’s work for us, not our work for God. Only God can show us how to worship God—fittingly, beautifully. Liturgy is not something beautiful we do for God, but something beautiful God does for us and among us. Public worship is neither our work nor our possession; as the Rule of St Benedict reminds us, it is *opus Dei*, God’s work. Our work is to feed the hungry, to refresh the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to care for the sick, to shelter the homeless; to visit the imprisoned; to welcome the stranger; to open our hands and hearts to the vulnerable and the needy. If we are doing those things well, liturgy and the Catholic identity it rehearses will very likely take care of themselves. Liturgical art is our public gratitude that God is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And there, perhaps, is where ethics and aesthetics together can begin to change the face of worship.³

³ Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner: Being Good and Being Beautiful,” *Worship* 74, no. 6 (November 2000): 557–58.

(2) *The Relationship between Liturgy and Theology*

Aidan Kavanagh, OSB (+2006), one of Nathan's teachers both at Saint Meinrad's School of Theology and at Notre Dame, is probably best known today in the academy for his work *On Liturgical Theology*.⁴ Therein, Kavanagh argues from the ancient formula of Prosper of Aquitaine, "*ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*," often appearing in the popular form, "*lex orandi, lex credendi*," that liturgy is to be construed as *theologia prima*, first-order theology that is expressed in the liturgical life of the church, in distinction to *theologia secunda*, which has to do with systematic reflection and dogmatic clarification. In response to Kavanagh's work, the meaning of liturgical theology today is undergoing considerable debate, well summarized in recent articles by Michael Aune⁵ and Robert F. Taft, SJ.⁶ Nathan's own contribution to this whole puzzle of the relationship between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*, while taking Kavanagh seriously, moves us beyond the either-or alternatives of most contemporary approaches:

[T]he ancient, binary formula *lex orandi, lex credendi* ("the rule of prayer is the rule of faith")—though often invoked to assert the priority of doxology over doctrine—is in fact something of a red herring. The formula is flawed from the get-go, because its reasoning is circular: "We believe," it asserts, "that the church's public prayer shapes what (and how?) we believe." But such a statement *already expresses fundamental convictions—beliefs—*about the nature of both Christ and church, beliefs that make liturgy possible (and obligatory) in the first place. There is a sense, of course, in which it is quite true to say that liturgy is where theology is born—where the church is "caught in the act of being most overtly itself as it stands faithfully in the presence of the One who is both object and source" of its faith—and hence that liturgy alone deserves the moniker *theologia prima*. Still, the *lex orandi, lex credendi* formula suffers from the same

⁴ Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984).

⁵ Michael Aune, "Liturgy and Theology: Rethinking the Relationship," *Worship* 81, no. 2 (2007): 46–68, 141–69.

⁶ Robert Taft, "Mrs. Murphy Goes to Moscow: Schmemmann, Kavanagh, and the Byzantine Synthesis," *Worship* 85, no. 5 (2011): 386–407.

limitations that beset all such closed-circuit, binary oppositions. If doxology checks doctrine, might not the reverse be true as well, viz., that doctrine checks doxology?⁷

(3) *Liturgical History and Its Implications*

Trained at Notre Dame in classic *Liturgiewissenschaft* or “comparative liturgiology,” Nathan’s understanding of liturgy is imbued with an astute historical-critical sense of the various liturgical traditions and historical periods of East and West, and is permeated concomitantly with his first-hand familiarity with the liturgical sources of those traditions. Frequently in his writings this historical sense comes to bear on several distinct contemporary issues. For example, in response to a 1997 comment by then Josef Cardinal Ratzinger about the “damage” that the *Missale Romanum* of Pope Paul VI had allegedly inflicted upon the Church when “the old [Tridentine liturgical] structure was dismantled, and its pieces were used to construct another,” with the result that the current Missal represented a “wholesale replacement” of one liturgy with another,⁸ Nathan had this to say:

Ironically, however, one could turn this argument with equal—indeed *superior*—force against the reforms that followed the Council of Trent. History will show, I believe, that *no* ecumenical council prior to Trent had ever commissioned a pope to reform the “breviary” and “missal,” thereby creating a single, standard, invariably “uniform” liturgy for the entire Latin West. But that is precisely what Trent did, as Pope Pius V confirms in *Quo Primum* (the Apostolic Constitution printed in all official editions of the Missal of 1570). “As is fitting and suitable,” wrote the pope, “the Missal should correspond to the Breviary, for as there is *one way* of celebrating the Office in the church of God, so there ought to be *one rite* of celebrating Mass.” This was, of course, an unheard-of-innovation, a novelty that flew directly in the face of more than 1500 years of local diocesan

⁷ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, and Sacraments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 223.

⁸ “Pope Paul VI ‘Damaged Church,’” *The Catholic Messenger* (Davenport, IA) 115, 17 (April, 1997), 1, 10.

diversity and liturgical pluralism in the West. As any study of the historical evolution of the Latin lectionaries, sacramentaries and pontificals can demonstrate, the Western rites were characterized—until well into the Middle Ages—by a constant cross-fertilization and migratory hybridization, with (for example) “Frankish” books influencing “Roman” ones and vice versa . . . Even after Rome moved to seize the initiative, and the liturgy of the papal court began to supplant local (variable) “usages” in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, the development of the Roman liturgy into a recognizably “unified” rite was very gradual . . . What Trent did can only be described—to borrow Cardinal Ratzinger’s phrase—as a “wholesale replacement” of cherished local liturgies by a strange “new” rite concocted by “specialists” and promulgated by persons with “juridical competence”

One could thus make the case, I think that the liturgical reforms prompted by the Council of Trent were far more drastic, unprecedented, and untraditional than those which followed Vatican II. Prior to Trent, liturgical “normalcy” in the Western churches was characterized by local variation. Thus, Augustine of Canterbury complained to Pope Gregory the Great, “If there is only *one* faith, why are the customs of the churches so different? The holy Roman church celebrates Mass one way, while the churches of Gaul celebrate another way.” But Gregory responded: “You know the custom of the Roman church in which you were brought up; cherish it lovingly. But as far as I’m concerned, if you’ve discovered something more pleasing to almighty God—in the Roman or the Gallican or any other church—choose carefully, gathering the best customs from many different churches, and arrange them for use in the church of the English. . . . For we should love things not because of the places where they’re found, but because of the goodness they contain.” (Latin text in L. Hartmann, ed. *Monumenta Germaniae Historica*, Epistolae, II. Berlin: Weidmann, 1899, 344, lines 3–5 and 5–12; my translation.) . . . Here, Gregory epitomized the “classic” Roman tradition: *a generous acceptance of cultural difference and liturgical variation within the unity of faith*. In important respects, Trent’s “one-size-fits-all” reforms represented a backing away from this classic tradition of respect for local usage and historical evolution. To Gregory, it seemed perfectly natural (and theologically necessary) to countenance and even to cultivate a *diversity* of custom—pastoral and liturgical—within that *communion* of churches whose ultimate

bond is the *sacramentum fidei*. . . . In sum, the classic Roman tradition—formulated by popes like Gregory—was respect for diversity and local custom. This was “liturgical normalcy” for the Latin West. What is “abnormal” was the attempt to standardize a single rite (excluding all others) by “executive fiat”—a phenomenon that first emerged *not* (as Ratzinger suggests) at Vatican II, but at the Council of Trent!⁹

Two years later, in response to those, especially Roman Catholic seminarians, clamoring for new standards of “orthodoxy” and the “restoration” of more “traditional” liturgical expressions and pieties, Nathan returned again to the development of the Roman Rite in the Middle Ages, with the clarification that such a designation actually could be used, originally, to describe at least *four* different liturgical usages at *Rome* itself:

In short, “the” Roman Rite evolved as a loose confederation, a confluence of urban and papal practices that were further hybridized, especially—though not exclusively—by Gallican and Germanic material imported from north of the Alps. The whole idea of “a” Roman Rite is in many respects the invention of nineteenth-century liturgists like Prosper Guerangér, from whom allegiance to a single liturgical tradition (papal, Roman) offered stability in a Europe plagued by political and religious fragmentation. That is why van Dijk asserts: “Research into the ecclesiastical history of medieval Rome still labours under the assumption that, from the time when liturgical documents are available, the city had a single rite. This assumption is so long-standing that it has become almost venerable, not to say venerated. To put forward another point of view is like driving a wedge into the foundations of an ancient monument; it forebodes destruction.” ([S.J.P. van Dijk, “The Urban and Papal Rites in Seventh and Eighth-Century Rome,” *Sacris Erudiri* 12 (1961), 411–87], 415). . . .

. . . . Never one to be intimidated by uncomfortable facts, van Dijk continued his research. And he arrived at conclusions that might well cause today’s restorationists to tremble. He concluded,

⁹ Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner: Rereading Reform,” *Worship* 71, no. 5 (1997): 464–66.

for example, that in the late thirteenth century (ca. 1275), the city of Rome knew four different customs (or liturgical “rites,” if you will (Ibid., 416). These four—the liturgy of the papal court (used by the papal staff at the Lateran *palace* and in the pope’s own private chapel); the basilical liturgy of St. Peter’s in the Vatican (a revision of the Old-Roman rite); a new urban liturgy that combined elements from earlier urban and papal rites; and the liturgy of the Lateran *basilica* (served by a group of Canons Regular)—coexisted and “influenced each other thoroughly.” (Ibid., 416–21) Eventually, the liturgy of the papal court became, for a complex set of political and pastoral reasons, the one that most decisively shaped what we now call “the” Roman liturgy. . . .

Ironically, perhaps, the *roots* of this rite are not particularly “Roman” at all. As historian Jeffrey Richards notes, Rome had experienced a “dramatic influx” of Greek-speaking monks and clerics during the first half of the seventh century—many of them refugees from “Arab invasion and Monothelite persecution.” (*The Consul of God: The Life and Times of Gregory the Great* [London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1980], 121) “In their wake,” Richards continues, “there came a large-scale introduction of the cults of the Greek saints, Greek ecclesiastical rites and rituals, and even Greek church institutions into Rome. . . . *Ordo Romanus I* records the pope asking on Easter morning: ‘How many infants were baptized in Latin and how many in Greek?’” (Ibid.) No wonder Pope Gregory had to defend himself against the charge that he had permitted the Roman liturgy to be usurped by Greek customs!¹⁰

And, as the result of what might be called this Byzantinization of Roman liturgy, including the import of “caesaropapism” into the West, Nathan summarized further:

“The” Roman liturgy was thus well on its way to becoming a spectacle performed by trained specialists rather than common public prayer celebrated by people and ministers together. Rigid etiquette, Byzantine grandiosity and a refusal to permit any variation, change or improvisation thus became “symbols of Papal sovereignty in the West,

¹⁰ Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner: Back to the Future?” *Worship* 73, no. 1 (1999): 64–65.

turning the congregation into spectators and listeners. The distinguishing feature of the old urban rite, which was symbolic of the Roman community and was here displaced, was participation in the ritual by the congregation as well as the clergy. The new papal rite excluded the congregation and was built around the glorification of the pope." (Richards, *The Counsel of God*, 121). . . . In short, "the" Roman Rite was becoming a sort of infomercial aimed at focusing attention on the awesome person, power, prestige, and prerogatives of the pope. Not surprisingly, our first surviving description of a solemn papal Mass (*Ordo Romanus I*, probably produced in Rome sometime in the early eighth century) reveals precisely this kind of liturgy rooted in a "cult of personality."¹¹

If the above two examples are concerned with the contemporary relevance of the liturgical reforms of the Council of Trent and earlier medieval liturgical history questions, the final example for this section is rooted more in Nathan's own lived history of the transition from the pre-Vatican II rites to the present. In response this time to the 2007 *motu proprio* of Pope Benedict XVI, *Summorum Pontificum*, and the accompanying "Letter of Benedict XVI" sent to bishops, Nathan challenges Pope Benedict's allegation that after the *Missale Romanum* of Paul VI appeared, "in many places celebrations were not faithful to the prescriptions of the new Missal. . . . which frequently led to deformations of the liturgy which were hard to bear." ("Letter of Benedict XVI," 21) In response to this assertion, Nathan writes, displaying his own wonderful sense of humor:

No one would deny that the postconciliar liturgy—like the early eucharistic liturgy described by Paul in 1 Cor 11—has suffered its share of improprieties and indignities. Yet the use of MR [*Missale Romanum*] 1962 does nothing, in itself, to immunize either the liturgy or the faithful against such indignities and "deformations." I too remember the preconciliar *Missale Romanum*; it was the only Mass liturgy I knew throughout my childhood and young adulthood. That preconciliar missal (beautifully commented on by the likes of Pius Parsch and Aemiliana Löhr) shaped and nurtured my own

¹¹ Ibid., 66–67.

lifelong love of the Roman Rite. I have no personal animus against it, but I recognize that it needed a thorough *instauration*. Moreover, I well remember preconiliar “deformations” that were every bit as excruciating as any encountered after Vatican II’s reform. I still remember the eighth-grade children’s choir screeching its way through the Gregorian “*Missa de angelis*” at Sunday morning “High Mass,” while a would-be organist accompanied the chant with harmonization that can only be called Brahmsian. I remember pitifully scaled-down Masses (which commanded higher stipends than low Masses!) with their propers “chanted” in an incomprehensible *recto tono* because the solo singer did not dare “delay Father at the altar.” I remember nightmarish preconiliar Holy Week liturgies (including a Holy Saturday “celebration” that involved a pastor whose idea of what we now call the “light service” of the Easter Vigil was a five-minute quickie performed at a card table hastily erected in the sanctuary, using a birthday-cake candle and a cigarette lighter whose flint was blessed to light the “new fire.”). . . . The postconiliar liturgy, therefore, hardly has a monopoly on “hard to bear,” “arbitrary,” liturgical “deformations.” There were plenty to go around during the four hundred years between MR 1570 and MR 1970.¹²

(4) *Liturgy and Ethics or Justice*

In his definition of liturgy above, in describing “our work” in the world, the connection was made already between liturgy and justice in Nathan’s thought. This connection, a traditional hallmark of the Liturgical Movement itself, is perhaps best illustrated in Nathan’s most recent book on sacramental theology, *Meeting Mystery*. Here Nathan calls for the verification of Christian liturgy in the “liturgy of the neighbor.” Further, he articulates here what can only be called a *theologia crucis* as a hermeneutical key for Christian ethics.

Christian ritual is best understood as tablature or musical score—and that liturgical scores are “rhizomal, nomadic,” limitlessly multiple in meaning and internally “indeterminate,” that is, capable of verification only through the *exteriority* of ethical action. Christian liturgy

¹² Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner: Summorum Pontificum,” *Worship* 81, no. 6 (2007): 558–59.

begins as ritual practice but ends as ethical performance. Liturgy of the neighbor verifies liturgy of the church, much as a composer's score makes *music* only through the risk of performance . . . The slogan *lex orandi, lex credendi* does not, then, offer as much light as it may seem to promise. In spite of the tension between them, doxology and doctrine remain a cozy *ménage à deux*, each partner in the pair defining itself in terms of the other. But the deeper question is not whether faith controls worship, or vice versa, but whether either of them can be verified in the absence of a *lex agendi* (a rule of action or behavior), an ethical imperative that flows from the Christian's encounter with a God who is radically "un-God-like," a God who, in the cross of Jesus and in the bodies of the "poor, the hungry, the thirsty, the naked, the imprisoned," has become everything we believe a God is *not*. The ethical imperative implied by the phrase *lex agendi* breaks apart our comfortable "faith and worship" duo by introducing that subversive element of *indeterminacy*.¹³

In her introduction to Nathan's 2003 *Festschrift*, entitled *Ars Liturgiae: Worship, Aesthetics, and Praxis*, editor Clare Johnson, herself a contributor to this volume, had this to say about Nathan and "The Amen Corner":

Nathan's is the persistent voice that has sounded forth from the pages of "The Amen Corner" bimonthly since 1991 in the liturgical journal *Worship*. In his tenure as author of "The Amen Corner" Nathan has provided informed and insightful commentary on myriad topics. Always abreast of the latest liturgical developments, Nathan effortlessly weaves together everything from politics, papacy, and pop stars to arts, aesthetics, and architecture, offering his readers a measured and critical view of the most recent happenings and topic issues of both a secular and sacred nature . . . Among Nathan's many gifts, arguably his greatest is his aptitude for synthesis. The ability to interlace artistically the historical, theological, ritual, aesthetic, and pastoral dimensions of liturgical studies is something that seems to come naturally to Nathan . . . A self-described "card carrying Vatican II progressive," Nathan has made no apology for

¹³ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, and Sacraments* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006), 38–40, 223–25.

his unceasing promotion of the ideals and vision of the Second Vatican Council in his writings and work. He never hesitates to take the opportunity to affirm the liturgical principles outlined by the council, frequently advocating a vision of liturgy that recognizes the active agency of the assembly in the liturgical event as both subject and recipient of the sacramental action. Nathan has also been an advocate for the use of inclusive language, the inculturation of the liturgy, and the need for an active ethical response to flow from the liturgy into the world.¹⁴

Johnson's words could easily serve as an introduction to this volume, concerned as it is precisely with "The Amen Corner."

This volume, however, is not a *Festschrift* for Nathan written by others in his honor, but a celebration of his own thought as he has worked out his own liturgical theology in the pages of "The Amen Corner" over the more than twenty years of his writing the column. In part, this volume intends, as I have been doing in a smaller way so far in this introduction, to let Nathan's words speak for themselves by means of reprinting some of his significant "Amen Corners." But more than that, by means of introductory essays to various "Amen Corners," by six of Nathan's former Notre Dame doctoral students, five of whom wrote their PhD dissertations under his direction, and five of whom, of great significance for the future of liturgical studies, are *women* (!), Nathan's thought is put into dialogue with their own developing theological reflections. Hence, as the contributors were told, their introductory essays were to be something like thirty percent Nathan and seventy percent their own critical reflections on where Nathan's thought had led them and where it might go in the future.

Reflecting that approach, this volume is organized into six sections or chapters around various themes that appear from the selected "Amen Corners" themselves. These "themes" have been designated by a single word with the result that chapter 1 is entitled

¹⁴ *Ars Liturgiae: Worship, Aesthetics and Praxis: Essays in Honor of Nathan D. Mitchell*, ed. Clare V. Johnson (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 2003), x-xi.

“Body,” chapter 2 is “Word,” chapter 3 is “Spirit,” chapter 4 is “Beauty,” chapter 5 is “Justice,” and chapter 6 is “Unity.” In her introductory essay to chapter 1, “Body,” encompassing themes of Eucharist and Real Presence so often considered by Nathan in many published forms, Kimberly Belcher’s “Can a Mother Forget her Nursing Child? Flesh, Blessing, and the Eucharist” compares and contrasts her own experience of breastfeeding with being fed by Christ’s own flesh in the Eucharist. But this experience does not become for her a “privileged *locus theologicus*” for the Eucharist, or some kind of arbitrary or exclusive model to be emulated by others as a superior method of mothering. It is, rather, the other way around, that the Eucharist illumines *this* experience of nurture and feeding with one’s own flesh. She writes: “the ontological presence of Christ in the Eucharist enjoins on us a willingness to recognize the traces of presence elsewhere. A theology that seeks to find Christ in the Eucharist to the exclusion of Christ elsewhere will end with a Christ that remains nowhere. Rather, a living Eucharistic theology will lead to the conviction that God is remembered everywhere, that the whole universe, by which we are nourished, is the flesh of the Word, bearing the ineradicable traces of God’s constant love. The Word so longed for the world, as Julian [of Norwich] sees it, that he fell into the Virgin’s womb, becoming our Mother, and counts the suffering of the cross as nothing compared to the joy of being united with his beloved humanity.”¹⁵

Joél Schmidt’s introductory essay to chapter 2: “Word”: “‘There is a Christ Who is to be Made:’ Paradoxes in the Sacramentality of Preaching,”¹⁶ takes as its focus the challenge of contemporary Christian preaching, a concern near and dear to Nathan’s heart as well, given the rather poor quality of much modern preaching. Herein Schmidt writes that: “preaching is by its very nature a *creative act*. Preaching does not simply recite word-for-word the biblical texts or provide an historical exposition of Jesus’ life in its original context, but rather relates the character of God revealed in Jesus’ life “then” to the “now” of the congregation. This is an

¹⁵ Below, 11.

¹⁶ Below, 36–47.

imaginative, creative act that generates new meanings relevant to the current context which were emphatically not part of the biblical authors' original intentions. More specifically, such creative applications rely upon a schematizing function of the productive imagination in a kind of metaphorical transfer, that allows the preacher to see analogous similarities between Jesus' life then and the world situation now. Such an act, argues Schmidt with Nathan, is the creation of "fiction." That is, "Christ's presence in preaching is not primarily a matter of overcoming an inconvenient absence by re-presenting an identical lost Christ object. It is rather a question of how Christ is mediated through an *invented* object, what Ricoeur refers to as "fiction" since it does not have a referent in existing reality. As Ricoeur wrote, '*Fiction* addresses itself to deeply rooted potentialities of reality to the extent that they are absent from the actualities with which we deal in everyday life.'"¹⁷

Anne McGowan introduces chapter 3: "Spirit," with her essay, "Inspired Bodies in Action: Tracing the Spirit through Metaphor, Materiality, and Motion." Herein she underscores what might be termed a liturgical pneumatology, noting that: "while the Spirit has no concrete incarnation of its own and is often described using impersonal imagery, part of the Spirit's work in the world appears to be building bodies and drawing them together, demonstrating that matter *matters* to God. Finally, the Spirit emerges as an active force in almost constant motion, inciting dynamism in all it touches and prompting contemplation of the movement within the life of the triune God and the call of those caught up into this life through the sacraments (especially baptism and Eucharist) to be active participants in God's mission in the world."¹⁸

As noted above, Nathan's own definition of Christian liturgy contains reference both to ethics and aesthetics, that is: "liturgical art is our public gratitude that God is doing for us what we cannot do for ourselves. And there, perhaps, is where ethics and aesthetics

¹⁷ Below, 43.

¹⁸ Below, 65.

together can begin to change the face of worship.”¹⁹ Chapter 4: “Beauty,” focuses on this relationship in greater detail. Clare Johnson’s essay, “Portals to Transcendence,” provides a theological foundation for this relationship as well as drawing implications from it for “beautiful” liturgical celebrations, namely, for the importance of a worthy “*ars celebrandi*.” She writes that

if liturgy is beautiful because it is an encounter with Christ the expression of God’s beauty, and if liturgy is the expression of faith of those created in the image and likeness of the Beautiful, an assembly of the beautiful (as Christ’s body at worship), then it can be argued that the faithful have a right to beauty in worship, and a right to become cocreators of beauty in worship by participating in the work of God which is the liturgy. What is less-than-beautiful in the manner of celebrating the liturgy thus must be avoided at all costs. If what is at stake is the faith life of believers, which poor celebrations risk weakening or destroying, then good celebrations, beautiful celebrations, are vital because the encounter with Christ’s beauty in the liturgy is that which changes us/opens us up to desire the promotion of what we have experienced: exposure to God’s beauty prompts us both to promote and emulate that beauty beyond the realm of the liturgical.²⁰

Chapter 5: “Justice,” is introduced by Katharine Harmon’s essay, “Linking Cult to Care: Social Transformation and the Liturgical Movement.” Herein Harmon picks up on Nathan’s strong commitments to the relationship between liturgy and ethics, as noted already above. Reflecting her own doctoral work on the liturgical movement in the United States, Harmon writes that: “the vision of the liturgical movement never ended in its media, be it worship aids, missals, microphones, or vernacular translations. The liturgical movement was a *social movement*, seeking to bring the faithful to a deeper realization of their role in the great Mystical Body of Christ, both within the act of worship and as faithful members of

¹⁹ Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner: Being Good and Being Beautiful,” *Worship* 74, no. 6 (November 2000): 557–58.

²⁰ Below, 96–97.

the baptismal priesthood in the world.”²¹ Such a social transformation, she notes, included a vast array of women, whose own roles in the American liturgical movement she summarizes and highlights.²²

The final chapter, chapter 6: “Unity,” is introduced by Melanie Ross’s essay, “Church of the Second Chance: Reconciliation Among the Saint Maybes,” a response to the selected “Amen Corner” for this chapter, namely, Nathan’s 2011 column, “Gathering as an Act of Reconciliation.”²³ Christian unity presupposes some form of reconciliation not only between but within churches today, and Ross asks the question: “Can we worship next to those with whom we vehemently disagree? Will reconciliation as Nathan describes it—a making *different*, a making *otherwise*, an at/one/ment, which results in a new relationship that changes both progressives and conservatives—be possible? This is the question of our age.”²⁴ She answers her own question in the affirmative, saying: “T.S. Eliot beautifully captures this tension in his final quartet: ‘From wrong to wrong the exasperated spirit/ Proceeds, unless restored by that refining fire/ Where you must move in measure, like a dancer.’ We assemble around the eucharistic table week after week for precisely this reason: to be restored ‘by that refining fire.’ Ultimately, however, our gatherings can only be understood as acts of reconciliation insofar as we allow the light and heat of the liturgy to burn away our comfortable pretenses. . . . Like a dancer, the church must move in measure between the “already” of what God has accomplished through Christ by the power of the Spirit, and the “not-yet” of unjust inequalities and ongoing divisions. The steps of reconciliation are complicated, and the company of “saint maybes” is prone to stumble. Thanks be to God for prophets like Nathan

²¹ Below, 134. Emphasis added.

²² See her recent book, *And There Were Also Many Women There: Lay Women in the Liturgical Movement in the United States, 1926–59*, Foreword by Nathan D. Mitchell (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 2012).

²³ Nathan Mitchell, “The Amen Corner: Gathering as an Act of Reconciliation,” *Worship* 6 (2011): 542–53.

²⁴ Below, 167.

who lead the way, singing the truth and reminding us that Christianity is a cockeyed religion of atonement, complete forgiveness, and second chances.”²⁵

Here, then, is a celebration of Nathan Mitchell as poet, liturgical theologian, historian, prophet, and wordsmith as he is revealed, especially, though not exclusively, through “The Amen Corner.” And here as well in the introductory essays in this volume is reflected the fruit of Nathan’s many years as a teacher and mentor of graduate students at the University of Notre Dame as they now take his insights and develop them further in their own work and academic careers. It is nothing other than a sheer delight to be part of this celebration.

Finally, on behalf also of the other editors, Timothy O’Malley and Demetrio Yocum, I wish to thank especially Mary Catherine Hilbert for her foreword, to all the contributors themselves, some of whom were not yet born, when Nathan first began writing “The Amen Corner,” and, of course, to Hans Christofferson and Lauren Murphy of the Liturgical Press for accepting this volume from us and for seeing it through to publication under the Pueblo imprint.

Maxwell E. Johnson
University of Notre Dame
November 13, 2013
All Saints of the Benedictine Order

²⁵ Below, 172–73.

Chapter One: *Body*

Can a Mother Forget Her Nursing Child?: Flesh, Recognition, and the Eucharist

Kimberly Hope Belcher

The Problem of Sacramental Presence

I distrust magical thinking. My thoughts do not change material entities; the universe is not persuaded by my desires. Thus it is always with some doubt, as well as with some faith, that when I am away from my infant daughter and need to express milk for her to drink, I pause to remember her face, the smell of her skin, her sleepy cry. It seems like magical thinking—and then suddenly there is a familiar tightening, and milk flowing into the bottle. My flesh remembers her, and my conscious discipline of remembering her, remembering her sensual presence, seems to be only a way of entering into this deeper memory with which I cannot forget her.

Our culture, too, distrusts magical thinking, fears that God's presence to us is a subjective projection of our desires; yet the flesh of the world remembers God, even as God remembers the world and draws it deeper into the mystery of salvation. Such thinking is not magical thinking, but sacramental thinking, which dares to remember the trace of God's presence on the flesh of the world.

From *Cult and Controversy* to *Meeting Mystery*, Nathan Mitchell has been focused on two key questions that limn the boundary between liturgical and sacramental theology: how do we understand God's presence to us and our presence to God in Christian worship? And how do the sacraments provide a paradigm for the

Christian experience of grace?¹ Both these questions prove to be problematic in richly productive ways. On the topic of presence, God's omnipresence makes it difficult to discuss in what way the sacraments provide a salvific, experiential "real presence" of God. On the sacramental "difference," it is difficult to give an apology for a special role of the sacraments in the Christian life without provoking sacramental minimalism and a divorce between liturgical life and piety. Nathan's answer to both questions is an emphasis on the dynamic of "recognition," not as a merely subjective and intellectual phenomenon, but as a relational crisis to which both God and humanity respond.

If we envision the public acts of liturgy as a garden lattice that structures the vine of Christian identity, Nathan is really interested in the vine. Nathan saw that the theological vision historically applied first to baptism and Eucharist, then to the seven sacraments, then to the public liturgies and the church structure, would also apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to other aspects of Christian life. Thus, in Nathan's work the interstices of liturgy and Christian spiritual life shrink, until, for example, the rosary, once the ultimate competitor with the active participation aimed at by the liturgical movement, can be seen as a mediating practice by which liturgical celebrations become embodied and internalized by practicing Catholics and thereby influence doctrinal consensus and emphasis.²

Nathan's project is to eradicate our barriers between the sacred and the ordinary, the holy and the hopeless, God and the world, until Christians can recognize God breaking into the world in all things, and become food for the rest of humanity.

Blessing: A New Starting Point

If we are to seek "a new starting point" to think of sacramental presence, as Nathan suggests in his 2006 essay, we must reject facile

¹ Nathan Mitchell, *Cult and Controversy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990); *Meeting Mystery* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2006).

² Nathan Mitchell, *Mystery of the Rosary* (New York: New York University Press, 2009).

but false dichotomies between self and other, presence and absence, spirit and body, and liturgy and popular devotion. We must also discard the temptation of easy answers, and resolve instead to live within the difficult, even scandalous questions that provoke us to change. For the Christian life, and thus the sacraments, is *metanoia*, repentance, the turning toward God, “rooted—like dance—in physical craving and desire, in the body’s urge to turn, to extend, to lift and stretch itself toward another.”³ This desire requires that presence always be balanced by a sense of distance, a space for another.

Nathan’s reconfiguring of sacramental discourse depends on the insight that God’s presence in the sacraments is, relatively speaking, a mundane thing. It is no great gift for God to become present in the things of creation. After all, as the Psalm says, “the earth is the Lord’s, and all that is in it”; nevertheless, the Psalm goes on to ask, “Who will ascend to the hill of the Lord?” (Ps 24:1, 3). This paradox represents the incalculable gift offered in the sacraments: the challenge and the power to recognize God’s presence. For God to be present is ordinary, but for God to be *revealed*—that is the sacramental gift. This does not mean that God’s presence in the sacraments can be reduced to the ordinary presence in all creatures; if the sacraments differed from the ordinary only by our imagination, we could not *recognize* but only *project* God’s presence. Sacramental presence is distinct from God’s ontological presence in all creation in that it reaches out, addresses itself to human beings, and perhaps even shakes them by the shoulder and demands that they attend! To reveal God’s presence, liturgy, like Jesus’s parabolic teaching and action in the gospels, “summons recognition and response,”⁴ and thus it is not incompatible with language that highlights the sensible absence, as well as the definitive and objective presence, of God among humanity.

Nathan turns to Jean-Luc Marion for a theological category that can accommodate both presence and absence, and returns with the

³ Nathan Mitchell, “The Poetics of Space,” *Worship* 67, no. 4 (July 1993): 363.

⁴ Nathan Mitchell, “Present in the Sacraments,” *Worship* 80, no. 4 (July 2006): 358.

concept of gift. A gift, for Marion, is not primarily a present nor a presence, but is a space opened where the other can come-into-presence, that is, where I recognize the other's presence to me. Certainly this way of thinking of gift is appropriate to the sacramental gift being given, whether we think of sacrament as Christ's power, as Thomas Aquinas did, or as Christ's promise, as John Calvin preferred, for both mean the participation in Christ's Gospel, which was marked by a radical kenosis, a "giving himself away." This giving occurs, as Marianne Sawicki argues, "at three tables simultaneously: the table of his word (in the gospel narratives), the table of his bread (broken for and among those gathered 'in his name'), and the table of the poor, where hunger and thirst become the 'baseline competence' needed to experience the Risen One."⁵ Sacramental presence, then, is a participation in this radical gift-giving, a space opened for hospitality not only to my neighbor, but also to a God who may exceed but will certainly never meet my expectations.

If sacramental grace, then, is the grace of recognition, the prophetic gift to recognize what God is doing in the world, how does the liturgy nurture this grace? It requires of us the seemingly passive capacities for "hunger and thirst"⁶ and for listening.⁷ Yet the passivity is deceptive, for hunger and thirst (or more broadly, humility, a recognition of our own neediness) and listening are skills of potentially infinite depth that can be fully developed only through long practice. It is an act, a word that paradigmatically provokes our listening, our hunger, and our thirst for God's presence in creation: a word of blessing.

It is important to recover the concept of blessing in its most fundamental Judeo-Christian sense, as first a "good word" offered for God's goodness, and secondarily a recognition of the goodness of an object that comes forth from God and a prayer that God may continue to be manifest in this object. "Blessed are you, Lord, our God, King of the universe, who has brought forth bread from the

⁵ Ibid., 355.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Mitchell, "The Poetics of Space," 367.

earth”: to bless is first an act of recognizing God’s presence, God’s good gifts, among the fruits of the earth. This opens a space within our vision for God to continue to come-into-presence, for us and for all creatures.⁸

In the Eucharist, in the extended act of blessing that the sacrament is, the three tables of Christ’s presence come together: “Bread is for the needy little ones.”⁹ In the eucharistic feast, the word is proclaimed over the bread and heard by the needy; the bread is recognized to be the flesh of Christ given for the needy; the rich hear the word and take the bread and recognize that they are the needy, called to be slaves to the poor ones of God. This experience should reveal that all tables are God’s table and call for every word we speak to be God’s word. It should throw light on the ecclesial body of Christ revealed in all the rites of the Church, and the crucified body revealed in all human need. In this sense, “the presence of Christ in the Eucharist does, in fact, illumine the fundamental nature of *all* [human] presence.”¹⁰

At the Margins of Life: The Work of Recognition

In fact, however, the transition from sacramental to mundane is not so simple. Human beings are always building up barriers to the full experience of God, always developing restrictions on what kind of God they will recognize. And, unfortunately, it is easy for these barriers to be imported into our eucharistic celebrations. In our complacency, we can even become bored with the table of God, and fail to recognize God’s work precisely where it is most recognizable, as the Israelites did in the wilderness: “we detest this miserable food!” (Num 21:5). It is imperative, for a robust liturgical spirituality, not only that the eucharistic experience inform our

⁸ See Lawrence A. Hoffman, “HaMotzi: The Deeper Significance of the Blessing over Bread,” <http://www.myjewishlearning.com/practices/Ritual/Prayer/Blessings/HaMotzi.shtml>, accessed November 13, 2013.

⁹ Mitchell, “Present in the Sacraments,” 357, quoting Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1994).

¹⁰ Mitchell, “Present in the Sacraments,” 359.

quotidian life, but for the quotidian to inform our experience of God in the Eucharist.

This is where my experience of breastfeeding is helpful to me. Breastfeeding is quotidian, even tedious at times. Not every parent, not every mother, has the opportunity and ability to do it, however, and so it is a gift. Yet the gift can be concealed, quite effectively, at three in the morning when the baby has eaten every two hours for the past seven days and is now crying again. To reclaim it as a gift requires an act of recognition on my part, a blessing, an opening of this space and time as a gift I offer to another, to this other. No doubt this act of recognition is always imperfect. Yet an imperfect recognition suffices, because it is not my mind that nourishes the baby, but my flesh, and my flesh remembers yesterday's space and time, and the day before, and the day before. My flesh is much better at listening, hungering, and thirsting, than my restless mind.

Like music and pain, the act of nourishing can become "coded in the body." It can become a part of identity that may ignore—but also transcend—my conscious choices. If I awaken the "skin's memory" of my child, of her need, I run the risk of becoming a body out of control, milk flowing not into the sanitary confinement of a bottle but all over my clothes, my body, and perhaps my sense of self. Matter out of place. But Jesus's saying, "Anyone who does not come to the kingdom like a child will not enter," encouraged early Christians to see God as an out of control mother as well, grace pouring sweet and free and messy all over the face of creation, blessedly ignorant of the obvious distinctions between Jew and Greek, slave and free, man and woman.¹¹ Nathan, too, reminds us to see God's grace pouring out all over creation, messing up the boundaries we have made to clean it up, to keep things and people in their places. At the table of "God's breast," common sense boundaries are erased and threatening scandal is reinterpreted as nourishing freedom.

¹¹ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 27–50.

At its best, sacramental practice is a reminder that the whole world is God's breast. In the psalms, creation is not only God's artistry and playground, but perhaps most of all God's table, with food and drink fit for human beings and for all the other creatures. Psalm 104:20-23 even praises God's wisdom for the cycles of the day, which allow times for the predators to prowl and be fed by God as well as times for human beings to labor safely for their bread. The generosity of this recognition of the needs of dangerous animals is at odds with the usual human strategy of eliminating predators who threaten us or our sources of food.¹² If we allow this generosity, this willingness that others be nourished, to become encoded in our flesh, we will be able to resist the temptation to see the world as a zero-sum game, where for me to be fed, another must go hungry. We will be called to recognize the world as a place of nourishment and work so that all may be fed.

Is breastfeeding, then, a privileged *locus theologicus* for understanding the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, and by extension in all the sacraments? No! Such privileged points need to be strictly eradicated from our thinking. For such locations pit us against one another, reducing the mystery of parenting to "breast or bottle feeding?", the church to progressives vs. traditionalists, and even the celebration of our unity in Christ to a meal *or* a sacrifice. Rather, the celebration of the Eucharist is at the center, and is the only privileged place for interpretation. In order to verify that center (to "make it true"), we must follow the traces of the celebration outwards, until it touches even the margins of human existence, rendering the quotidian holy. Only then will we be able to return to the center with a restored desire for communion. How can we develop and interpret these outer traces, the places where the eucharistic life blossoms in the mundane? I propose that in order to do this, we need to see the Eucharist not only as Christ's body but as Christ's flesh.¹³

¹² Rosie Woodroffe, "Predators and People: Using Human Densities to Interpret Declines of Large Carnivores," *Animal Conservation* 3, no. 2 (2000): 165-73.

¹³ On the early Christian use of "flesh," "fragments," and other words for the Eucharistic meal, see Paul Bradshaw, "Did Jesus Institute the Eucharist at the

Flesh: Presence in the World

Jean-Luc Marion assigns the limit of Cartesian anthropology to the notion that the human person is soul and body, where the body is mere matter like other matter, and the soul is a spiritual principle inhabiting it. This notion is flawed in that every observer exists in the world because of the “feeling flesh, never felt otherwise than as originally feeling.”¹⁴ Without flesh, there can be no body; that is, I only have access to any body as body (rather than as inert matter) inasmuch as my feeling flesh has “attach[ed] me to a body of the world, because first it will feel it, therefore it will be able to feel it like its own, indeed appropriate it as its own.”¹⁵ When I look at other human beings, I may be able to envision them as material bodies animated by spiritual souls, but when I examine my own experience I should see that the fleshy character of perception and the perceptive character of my flesh goes all the way down: “My flesh . . . before even being able to perceive itself as a possible external object in the world, it perceives; before even making itself be felt, it allows one to feel; in short, before making itself be seen and appearing, it makes me feel (myself) and appear.”¹⁶ Because my subjectivity is inscribed in the irreducible materiality of my flesh, I experience time, Marion suggests, not as “passing,” but as “accumulating” in my flesh, especially in my face where I am revealed to the world. “Only time can draw the portrait of a face, since it alone sketches it. . . . [A]ccomplished time only manifests itself in taking flesh in mine, which it defeats, affects, marks. It takes flesh in me.”¹⁷ We can only perceive the past, Marion suggests, because both we and the world (faces and buildings) have been marked and altered by time taking flesh.

Last Supper?” in *Issues in Eucharistic Praying in East and West*, ed. Maxwell Johnson (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2010), 1–19.

¹⁴ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Flesh or the Givenness of the Self,” *In Excess* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2004), 88.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 87.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 95.

In the scriptures, too, the God who does not alter has allowed Godself to be marked by the taking of the flesh of the world. Of course this is true of the incarnation, but it is also a theme of Isaiah 66, where God is identified with the nursing mother Jerusalem:

Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be glad for her,
all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy,
all you who mourn over her—
that you may nurse and be satisfied
from her consoling breast;
that you may drink deeply with delight
from her glorious bosom.
For thus says the Lord:
I will extend prosperity to her like a river,
and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream;
and you shall nurse and be carried on her arm,
and dandled on her knees.
As a mother comforts her child,
so I will comfort you;
you shall be comforted in Jerusalem.

Here Jerusalem nourishes the returned exiles of Judah, becoming the flesh of God's care, which is like that of "a woman [for] her nursing-child . . . the child of her womb" (Isaiah 49). The Christian proclamation of astonishing divine mercy was grounded in this recognition of the world as evidence of God's compassion, and such a cosmic spirituality is embedded in the Eucharist from the outset.¹⁸

Christians have embedded their memory in inanimate things; recently in smartphones, but more deeply in liturgical things: pilgrimage Madonnas, huge cathedrals, even God. "Lord, remember your church," we plead, knowing that we are the ones who have forgotten. Poets and mystics remind us of the immanence of the

¹⁸ In the early period, eucharistic theology implied a nondocetic Christology and a contra-Gnostic anthropology; see, e.g., Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 449–50.

spirit in the mundane stuff of the world. Julian of Norwich is even able to see excretion as the proof of God's care: "A man goes upright, and the soule [waste!] of his body is spared [hidden] as a purse full fair. And when it is time of his necessary, it is opened and spared again full honestly. And that it is [God] that does this, it is showed there where he says he comes down to us to the lowest part of our need."¹⁹ The use of the word "soule" for waste here challenges, as does much of Julian's work, the notion that God cares for the soul, not the body.

Instead of a duality of mind and body, Julian proposes that human beings are made of substance and sensuality; the substance is like to and enclosed in the whole Trinity, and the sensuality was assumed by and is enclosed in "Christ our Mother" in his taking flesh, so that humans are "oned" to God in their entirety (chaps. 57–61). "Sensuality," like Marion's "flesh," implies the human experience of existence in a spiritual and sensory relationship to the world. The daring continuity of the flesh, that unity between soul and body, exemplifies Julian's theology of creation, which is all "beclosyd" (enclosed, enveloped) in God by its very nature. This radical anthropology is the unparalleled foundation for the theology of God's motherhood so often remarked in her work:

The mother may give her child suck of her milk, but our precious Mother Jesus, he may feed us with himself, and does full courteously and full tenderly with the blessed sacrament that is precious food of very life. . . . The mother may lay her child tenderly to her breast, but our tender Mother Jesus, he may homely lead us into his blessed breast by his sweet open side and show us therein part of the God-head and the joys of heaven.²⁰

In the very fleshly body of Christ, inside the wound that is Christ's "breast" in medieval iconography and in Julian's vision,

¹⁹ Julian of Norwich, *Showings* (New York: Norton, 2005), chap. 6, spelling modernized.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, chap. 60, spelling modernized.

the whole spiritual realm is revealed.²¹ The Eucharist is the ultimate witness that Jesus has taken flesh, not only that of the Virgin, but our flesh, and by the extension the world through which we know ourselves as flesh. The whole world is enclosed in God as the world is enclosed in the human body; notice how the image of “soule” as digested food in the intestines erases the boundaries between the matter that is the human person (body) and that coming from and going to the whole cosmic cycle (food, waste).

A theology of eucharistic presence that attended to this radical anthropology and the Christology it implies would recover the idea that the Eucharist, as the *flesh* of Christ, cannot be reduced to an inanimate object. Rather, we must take seriously the act of blessing in Christ’s name that inaugurates his presence and the symbolic microcosms of the universe nourishing animal life that bread and wine are. The ontological presence of Christ in the Eucharist enjoins on us a willingness to recognize the traces of presence elsewhere. A theology that seeks to find Christ in the Eucharist to the exclusion of Christ elsewhere will end with a Christ that remains nowhere. Rather, a living eucharistic theology will lead to the conviction that God is remembered everywhere, that the whole universe, by which we are nourished, is the flesh of the Word, bearing the ineradicable traces of God’s constant love. The Word so longed for the world, as Julian sees it, that he fell into the Virgin’s womb, becoming our Mother, and counts the suffering of the cross as nothing compared to the joy of being united with his beloved humanity.

Conclusion

If both the God of the sacramental economy and the world blessed by it are “half clod, half sun, alive from the root,” sacramental theology needs to be willing to go through the sacramental rites to find the places where the world, even in its characteristic worldliness, is busy remembering the presence of God. The common

²¹ For a broader context on the understanding of Christ’s wounded side as a breast, see, e.g., Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast and Holy Fast* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

table, the domestic church, the nourishing breast; none can be a privileged locus, but none can be excluded, either, from the task of remembering grace. For the act of recognition that epitomizes sacramental grace—"this, here! is the flesh of Christ"—is a radically inclusive act of blessing that dares to open mundane matter to the substance of God, knowing that the Word has dared to unite himself to human flesh. It is the Holy Spirit that empowers us to make this identification, to listen to one another as we follow this elusive presence out into the world, rendering it in different ways.

The sacramentality of the world does not make the sacraments *less* sacramental; rather, the sacramental act of blessing makes the world sacramental. Any definition of sacraments that begins from the desire to distinguish sacraments categorically from things that are not sacraments will end by dividing the church, for it is the defining characteristic of sacraments, paradoxically, to drag those things that are not sacraments in, to bless them, and to recognize in them and transform them into mediations of God in the flesh of the world.

*"The Poetics of Space"*¹

This Earth is the honey of all Beings, and all Beings
Are the honey of this Earth . . . O bright immortal Lover
That is incarnate in the body's earth—
O bright immortal Lover Who is All!

This Water is the honey of all Beings, and all Beings
Are the honey of this Water . . . O the bright immortal Lover
That is in water and that is the seed
Of Life . . . O bright immortal Lover Who is All!

This Fire is the honey of all Beings, and all Beings
Are the honey of this Fire . . . O bright immortal Lover
That is in fire and shines in mortal speech—
O bright immortal Lover Who is All!

This Air is the honey of all Beings, and all Beings
Are the honey of this Air . . . O bright immortal Lover
That is in air and is our Being's breath—
O bright immortal Lover Who is All!²

In this poem from her "Bee Oracles," Edith Sitwell imagined Earth as a good-humored old woman—half clod, half sun, alive from the root—who leans her dusty ear to the hive, where she hears "her sisters of the barren lives," the "priestesses and prophetesses," sing their golden "hymn of being to the lost." It is an ecstatic hymn, huge with hope, sweetened by the honey of earth, air, fire, water,

¹ This essay originally appeared in "The Amen Corner," *Worship* 67, no. 4 (July 1993): 360–67.

² Edith Sitwell, "The Bee-Keeper," in *The Canticle of the Rose: Poems 1917–1949* (New York: Vanguard Press, 1949), 238.

thunder, sap and sun. Sitwell seemed to know, as all poets do, that earth is an oracle—and our consciousness of it, a great poem spun over centuries by bards and balladeers. Sitwell recognized, too, that even in its most natural, unspoiled condition, earth is never simply “empty”—it is always *composed, arranged* by wind and sun, rain and ice, snowfall and footfall. We never get nature “pure.” We get it processed by priestesses and prophetesses spinning nectar into honeycomb. We get it pounded and beached as white-sand silicone along Carmel’s shoreline. We get it sifted, heaped and molded as dunes along the southeastern coast of Lake Michigan. We get it reddened by aeons of pressure, fire and wind in the Sangre de Cristo range, mountains crimson as Christ’s blood.

Even the magnificent repose and stillness of the Japanese imperial gardens at Katsura are not *natura pura*, but deftly arranged landscapes of light and stone, green and grey, form and freedom. Nature is never empty—it is always *claimed* by the presence of something or someone. That presence is so fragile, yet so filling, that it seems, often, not to be there at all. Hence the Westerner’s discomfort at the apparent “emptiness” of a Zen garden or a room prepared for the tea ceremony. In fact, of course, those spaces are so crowded with presence, so rich and rightly balanced in beauty and bounty, that to *add* one single branch or blossom would arrest the movement and ruin everything.

There is, in sum, a *poetics* of space, a perfect economy of rest and motion, presence and “emptiness,” light and shadow—which transfigures our experience of rooms and buildings—and landscapes. We first feel such a poetics arising within our bodies, for we are instinctively, powerfully drawn *toward* some spaces (a river’s waters rearranged by rocks and rapids) and just as instinctively repelled by others (a refuse-littered landfill). Our bodies know which spaces welcome the human and the humane. Unfortunately, the body’s wisdom is often overruled by minds which tell us that burnt-brown naugahyde is beautiful and that “what this room really needs” is another chain-lamp or a painted-velvet portrait of Elvis.

As that superb—though much-maligned and often-ignored—document *Environment and Art in Catholic Worship* (hereafter EACW)

puts it: "Our words and art forms cannot contain or confine God, [but] they can, like the world itself, be icons, avenues of approach, numinous presences, ways of touching without totally grasping or seizing. Flood, fire, the rock, the sea, the mountain, the cloud, the political situations and institutions of succeeding periods—in all of them Israel touched the face of God, found help for discerning a way, moved toward the reign of justice and peace." Like the covenant itself, the liturgical celebrations of the faith community (church) involve the whole person. They are not purely religious or merely rational and intellectual exercises, but also human experiences calling on all human faculties: body, mind, senses, imagination, emotions, memory. Attention to these is one of the urgent needs of contemporary liturgical renewal (EACW, ## 2; 5).

The church's worship is *embodied* worship; its spaces for celebration are shaped and served by *enfleshed* creatures, by the touch of skin against stone, and weight against wood. This essay will explore three aspects of what I'm calling (after Gaston Bachelard) "the poetics of space": the skin's memory, the body's wisdom, and the geometry of prayer.

The Skin Remembers: Anyone who has ever played a musical instrument (keyboards, at least) knows that remembered music is buried in the skin. I first learned Robert Schumann's A-minor piano concerto thirty-five years ago, and I've played it rarely since. But if I were to sit down at a piano today, my hands, arms, feet and back would quickly remember how that music goes—much more (and more reliably) than my mind. Musical memories are coded in the body as motion and sequence, pitch and timbre, rhythm and repetition. The same can be said of pain. There comes a moment, in suffering, when the mind refuses any longer to recollect its source or beginning:

After great pain, a formal feeling comes—

The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs— . . .
The Feet, mechanical, go round—
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought—
A Wooden way
Regardless grown,

A Quartz contentment, like a stone—
This is the Hour of Lead—
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow—
First—Chill—then Stupor—then the letting go—³

It is the nerves “sitting ceremonious like tombs” that remember pain’s name and nature, its stupefying sameness and dull duration. Ask any amputee. She or he will tell you that the lost limb still feels pressure and pain.

Traditional Christian liturgies (and newly emergent ones as well) appeal strongly to the body’s memory, to its tactile inventory. For in embodied rites, so much depends on what is *done*, not what is said. The liturgies of Lent, for instance, begin on Ash Wednesday with a ritual act of physical “disfigurement” that rearranges the head and face, painting them with ashes. In the northern hemisphere, these charcoal drawings, etched on winter-weathered skin, may well resemble death-camp art. As indeed they should. For repentance is not a state of mind, but the body’s slow and deliberate turning toward the fire that burns, consumes, and cleanses. Unless you are willing to be “burnt, burnt alive, burnt down / to hot and flocculent ash,” wrote D. H. Lawrence, you will never really change. *Metanoia*, repentance, is rooted—like dance—in physical craving and desire, in the body’s urge to turn, to extend, to lift and stretch itself toward another. As *Time* magazine reported in a 1975 essay on the art of Mikhail Baryshnikov, “When he launches his perfectly arched body into the arc of one of his improbably sustained leaps—high, light, the leg beats blurring precision—he transcends the limits of physique and, it sometimes seems, those of gravity itself. . . . He is an unbelievable technician with invisible technique. Most dancers, even the great ones, make obvious preliminaries to leaps. He simply floats into confounding feats of acrobatics and then comes to still, collected repose. He forces the eye into a double take;

³ Emily Dickinson, “After great pain, a formal feeling comes—,” *The Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson*, ed. T. H. Johnson (Boston: Little, Brown & Company, 1960), 162.

did that man actually do that just now?"⁴ *Transcending the limits . . . "defying gravity" . . . floating into confounding feats . . . coming back to still, collected repose: isn't that what repentance is all about?*

Or consider the liturgy of Christian initiation, where the body's slumbering memories are abruptly awakened by the deep, cold shock of water, aroused by the warmth of oil-slick fingers, and enveloped by the welcome tastes of bread and wine. The theologians of the East sometimes likened the Spirit, at work in such sacraments, to a skillful painter with brush in hand. And there is probably no student of sacramental theology who has not, at one time or another, read these words of Tertullian: "The flesh is the hinge of salvation (*caro cardo salutis*) . . . For the flesh is washed that the soul may be cleansed; the flesh is anointed that the soul may be consecrated; the flesh is sealed that the soul may be strengthened; the flesh is overshadowed by the laying on of hands that the soul may be illumined; the flesh is fed by Christ's body and blood that the soul may fatten on God. Since they have been joined in such [saving] deeds, they cannot be separated in their destined reward" (*De Resurrectione Mortuorum*; 8:2-3).

Or recall the old rites of consecrating a church and altar. As EACW wisely notes, the Christian assembly's building is not a barricade (keeping world out and *sacra* in), but "a shelter or 'skin' for liturgical action. It does not have to 'look like' anything else, past or present. Its integrity, simplicity and beauty, its physical location and landscaping should take into account the neighborhood, city and area in which it is built" (EACW, # 42). Like skin, a church *breathes*, interacts continually with its environment, becoming somehow (if nonverbally) "conscious" of the play between light and shadow, open and closed, this season and that. And because it is skin, because it is a body, the old consecration liturgy dealt with the building in ways profoundly personal and violently physical. Like a public sinner or a heretic in some macabre medieval fantasy, it was ritually set afire; like a neophyte, it was washed with water and anointed with perfumed oil; like a slave, its

⁴ Cited in Michael Murphy, *The Future of the Body* (Los Angeles: Jeremy Tarcher, 1992), 111.

skin was indelibly branded with the marks of its Owner—wounds forever lit by cross and candle. The church was named, like any newborn—Mary, Ann, Elizabeth; John Mark, Matthew. Its consecration (as a body for the Body) was annually celebrated with dancing and feasting. For like the assembly itself, the church's skin remembers.

The Body's Wisdom: As a species and as a church, then, our deepest aspirations and secrets are inscribed in the skin, carved into the body. This is a source of both gall and grandeur for us. The galling aspects of the body's modes of memory are well recorded in this poem of Anne Sexton:

We are all earthworms
digging into our wrinkles.
We live beneath the ground
and if Christ should come in the form of a plow
and dig a furrow and push us up into the day
we earthworms would be blinded by the sudden light
and writhe in our distress.⁵

But the body is not only a chronicler of pain; it is also a chamber of grandeur which opens onto the whole history of our species' search for truth and meaning. For these latter are not simply objects of the mind; they arise within the body. What Carl Gustav Jung first called "archetypes" (in 1919) are not only patterns of thought and cognition, they are patterns of *bodily* action that dispose us toward *ritual* explorations of our conflicts and *ritual* solutions to our problems. As Jung himself noted, archetypes are not only "images and emotions," they are "*systems of readiness for action.*" Archetypes are more than "inherited ideas"; they are *patterns of bodily behavior*—biologically rooted, inborn responses that cause certain kinds of wasps to sting the motor ganglion of caterpillars, that help certain species of eels to find their way to Bermuda, that cause seven-week-old human babies to wave their arm *for purely*

⁵ Anne Sexton, "The Wall," in *The Awful Rowing toward God* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1975), 46–47.

symbolic reasons. Each of us, as Anthony Stevens has noted, is born with an “archetypal endowment,” a built-in biological clock that encompasses the whole life-cycle of our species—“being mothered, establishing a place in the social hierarchy, courting, marrying, child-rearing, hunting, gathering, fighting, participating in religious rituals, assuming the cultural responsibilities of advanced maturity, senility, and preparation for death.”⁶

As Stevens explains elsewhere, the *ritual embodiment* of archetypal images and patterns—in puberty rites, for instance, or in other initiatory scenarios—breaks through psychic “log jams,” overturns the *status quo* and so promotes the personal and social changes necessary for the survival of individuals and groups.⁷ Such initiatory rites, Stevens notes, evidently became essential in the evolution of human cultures because “individual willingness to submit to the demands and disciplines of outer reality is not something which occurs automatically with the normal processes of growth. It has to be imposed with sufficient determination to overcome . . . ‘the renegade tendency,’ that combination of inertia, fear, and resistance to change which characterizes the Trickster, who clings to the *status quo* and . . . accepts no discipline other than his own experimental attitude to life.”⁸

Somewhere along the line, in other words, the micro-history of the individual has to be grafted onto the macro-history of the tribe. This grafting is first and foremost a *physical* act. “Bring the body—the mind will follow.” That is the reason why, in many traditional cultures, pubescent boys are taken into the bush to be circumcised (new identity, carved in the flesh), painted white (the color of death), and taught all the rites of adult manhood. It is the reason why young girls, at their first menstruation, are secluded, instructed in the mysteries of womanhood, then feted extravagantly. It is also the reason why Christians are initiated by means of an

⁶ Anthony Stevens, “Thoughts on the Psychobiology of Religion and the Neurobiology of Archetypal Experience,” *Zygon* 21, no. 2 (1986): 12.

⁷ See Anthony Stevens, *Archetypes: A Natural History of the Self* (New York: Morrow, 1982), 147–49.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 148.

embodied ritual process rather than by means of a syllabus. In all these cases, what the tribe has to teach resides in its skin. As an old Zen proverb puts it, “There are some things that can be known only by rubbing two people together.”

The Geometry of Prayer: In spite of all our rhetoric about prayer as a “spiritual” experience, then, it is in fact a celebration of the skin and senses. Perhaps this is no more clearly evident than in the postures we bring to prayer. Kneeling, for instance, does not call up the “idea” of humility or the “attitude” of adoration; it is the very act of humble adoration itself, inscribed in the body’s motion. Lifting the arms in petition and praise does not describe a mental state; it *enacts* a relational reality, puts humans in touch with God—Giver of bread and breath, Shining Source of bone and sinew. As EACW (## 2–8; 55–62) suggests, ritual postures are not idle or optional movements intended to “heighten,” “dramatize,” or “solemnize” actions; they *are* the rite—they *are* the way the assembly experiences God in this time and space. A procession is not “about” God’s presence or revelation; it is an epiphany of the Holy One, who marches before and behind a people—a Column of Cloud by day, a Pillar of Fire by night. Every movement through space *reconfigures* space, redraws the world’s map, redefines the terms of our turning, in love and longing, toward God.

Ritual prayer is, then, a holy geometry—of intersecting bodies, processional motion, departures and arrivals; of smoke swirling in spiraling circles from censers swung in arcs; of bodies bent, arms extended, voices lifted. I am reminded, in this connection, of a wonderful essay by Robert Lawlor that appeared fifteen years ago in an issue of *Parabola* (Vol. 3:1 [1978], 12–19). Entitled “Geometry at the Service of Prayer: Cistercian Mystic Architecture,” the essay discussed the extraordinary architectural qualities of twelfth-century monastic churches (such as the one near the tiny southern French village of Le Thoronet). So exquisitely constructed were these buildings that a pin dropped in the church’s nave produces a full set of harmonic overtones. As the monks sang in those spaces, the walls quite literally breathed in speech and sound, vibrated with the pitches of rising and falling voices. Song set the building in motion. And even though Cistercian ideology championed the

suppression of the *visual* sense (through whitewashed walls, clear-glass windows), it subtly fostered the acoustic and tactile. In effect, the monks, whose singing bodies vibrated in concert with the church's walls, received an acoustic massage! Perhaps that is why St. Bernard was convinced that if we are to see God "face to face," our vision must first be restored through *hearing*. "You should know," he told his monks in a chapter sermon, "that the Holy Spirit educates hearing before leading you to vision. 'Listen my child,' says the Spirit, 'and see.' Why are you straining to see? First, it is necessary to lend the ear. Hearing will restore vision to us if our attention is devout, faithful and vigilant. For only hearing attains the truth, since only hearing perceives the Word." For the early Cistercians, ascetic austerity was balanced by sensual singing, by the skin's recognition that God is known in the marrow before being known in the mind. For them, sound became light and food, charging the body with energy and infusing it with knowledge. Acoustically perfect spaces initiated those monks into the geometry of prayer. We should be so lucky!

“Present in the Sacraments”¹

“In my beginning,” wrote poet T. S. Eliot famously, “is my end.”² Departures beget arrivals, and starting points shape conclusions. Such is the case not only if we probe the riddles of faith and life—where, Eliot assures us, “the end of all our exploring / Will be to arrive where we started / And know the place for the first time”³—but also if we try to think theologically. Where we start goes a long way toward determining where we will end.

This is particularly true, I think, when we begin to ponder if or how Christ is “present in the sacraments” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium* 7). Thus, for example, in his *Commentary on John’s Gospel*, St. Augustine thinks sacrament starting from Christ’s own power and agency: “Even though many ministers—just or unjust—may baptize, the power of baptism should be attributed to Christ alone, on whom the dove descended and of whom it was said ‘This is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.’ Peter may baptize, but it is really Christ who baptizes. Paul may baptize, but it is Christ who baptizes. Judas may baptize, but still it is Christ who baptizes.”⁴ Eight

¹ This essay originally appeared in “The Amen Corner,” *Worship* 80, no. 4 (July 2006): 347–60.

² Just as famously, Eliot reverses his aphorism at the end of his second Quartet, “East Coker” (“In my end is my beginning”). See *Four Quartets* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich Harvest, 1971), lines 1 and 209, pp. 23 and 32, respectively.

³ Eliot, *Four Quartets*, “Little Gidding,” lines 240–42, p. 59.

⁴ *Tractatus in Ioannem*, 6.7; my translation. Clearly, Augustine was concerned about both the unity of baptism (many different ministers do not signify many different baptisms) and its efficacy (independent of the minister’s personal life and character). This is the text on which the bishops at Vatican II based

centuries later, in the third part of his *Summa Theologiae*, Aquinas thinks sacrament starting from sign and cause.⁵ And because Thomas sees a strict coherence between his Christology and his sacramental theology—sacraments flow and derive their efficacy from the incarnate Word—Christ is the indispensable source of a sacrament’s power to sanctify.⁶ In contrast, a sixteenth-century Reformer like John Calvin thinks sacrament starting from sign and covenant (promise). A sacrament, writes Calvin in the *Institutes*, “is an outward sign by which the Lord seals on our consciences the promises of his good will toward us.”⁷ Far from being an empty gesture, sacrament is, for Calvin, “a sign whereby God effects in us the promise that God signs and seals to us with that sign.”⁸ For that reason, he can write that in “the sacred mystery of the Supper,” the Lord “inwardly fulfills what he outwardly designates.”⁹

their assertion that “by his power,” Christ is “present in the sacraments so that when anybody baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes” (SC 7).

⁵ See *Summa Theologiae* (ST), IIIa Pars, 60.1; translations from the *Summa* are mine unless otherwise noted. As Louis-Marie Chauvet notes, this very first question in Thomas’ treatise on the sacraments in the *Summa* reveals significant maturation and innovation in his thinking, particularly in his view of the relation between sign and cause. See *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Pueblo, 1995), 9–21.

⁶ See the prologue to *ST*, IIIa Pars, 60: “After considering those things that pertain to the mysteries of the incarnate Word, one must ponder the church’s sacraments, which derive their efficacy from the incarnate Word himself.” See also *ST*, IIIa Pars, 60.3, corpus: “The word ‘sacrament’ is properly used for what is de-signed to signify our sanctification, about which three things may be considered: First, the very cause of our sanctification, which is the passion of Christ (*ipsa causa sanctificationis nostrae, quae est passio Christi*).” See also Chauvet, 20.

⁷ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV; xiv.1. English translations of the *Institutes* are taken from: John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, 2 vols.; Library of Christian Classics, vv. 20–21 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1960).

⁸ Nicholas Wolterstorff, “Not Presence But Action: Calvin on Sacraments,” *Perspectives* (March 1994): 16–22; here, 16.

⁹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, xvii.5.

Each of these writers—Augustine, Aquinas, Calvin—shows us not simply a different starting point for thinking sacrament, but also a distinct view of liturgy. Hence, Augustine can tell his people that when they eat and drink the Eucharist they “become what they receive” and “say Amen to what they are,” while Aquinas is preoccupied about the *dissimilar* way priests and people participate in the one priesthood of Christ—and hence about their dissimilar relation to sacraments and worship. “Liturgy,” writes Aquinas, “consists either in *receiving* certain divine realities or in *giving* them to others. In each case, a different power [*potential*] is required, for giving to others demands action, while receiving requires only passive power.”¹⁰ Priests *give*; people *receive*. But Calvin’s thought moves in another direction. Not surprisingly, he emphasizes the essential relation between sacrament and preaching, and is critical of what he perceives as late-medieval mumbling of the mysteries: “They [papists] thought it enough if the priest mumbled the formula of [eucharistic] consecration while the people looked on bewildered and without comprehension. Indeed, they deliberately saw to it that . . . nothing of doctrine should penetrate to the people.”¹¹ Both preacher and people are actively engaged in sacramental liturgy because in each “what increases and confirms faith is precisely the preparation of our minds by [the Holy Spirit’s] inward illumination to receive the confirmation [the seal of the covenant promise] extended by the sacraments.”¹² So, Calvin concludes, a sacrament “requires preaching to beget faith.”¹³ The view of liturgy that emerges from Calvin’s account of sacrament is clear. “To enter the liturgy, as Calvin understands it, is to enter the sphere not just of divine presence but of divine action. God, in Calvin’s way of thinking, is less a presence to be apprehended in the liturgy than an agent to be engaged.”¹⁴

¹⁰ *ST*, IIIa Pars, 63.2. See also *ST*, IIIa Pars, 63.5, corpus.

¹¹ *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, Book IV, xiv.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Wolterstorff, “Not Presence But Action,” 21. Wolterstorff’s essay explores several interesting affinities between the sacramental thought of Calvin and that of Aquinas.

Calvin's doctrine of God in the liturgy—an agent to be engaged rather than a presence to be apprehended—is actually far closer to Aquinas's than we might expect. In his mature discussion of sacraments in the *Summa*, Aquinas seems almost to avoid the discourse of *presence*, a point often missed by commentators. When he begins to discuss what we commonly call Christ's "real presence" in the Eucharist, for instance, Aquinas carefully poses his theme as follows: "Now let us consider how Christ exists [*existit*] in this sacrament by asking" (the eight questions that follow).¹⁵ One could of course argue that existence and presence amount to the same thing, but Thomas is subtler than that. He knows that presence is a richly multivalent reality that can be used of God, human persons, and material objects.¹⁶ Moreover, he understands that while we typically equate presence with place (with "being in a place"), such a common-sense equation is dangerously misleading. As counter-intuitive as it may seem, presence for Aquinas has no necessary connection with spatial location. Thus, for example, "what's known exists in the knower" and "what's desired in the one who desires," and hence God exists [*est*] in a special way in rational creatures who know and love him—but not as in a place (e.g., as water is physically contained in a glass).¹⁷ In fact, Aquinas argues that while God "exists in everything [*est in omnibus*],"¹⁸ this existence happens in distinct (but related) modes. Hence "God exists in everything by *power* inasmuch as everything is subject to his power, by *presence* inasmuch as everything is naked and open to his gaze, and by *substance* inasmuch as he exists in everything causing their existence."¹⁹ God's "being in (persons and) things" is real, yet obviously not bound by space or time. Moreover, presence, power, and substance are not identical, and so Aquinas explicitly rejects the

¹⁵ *ST*, IIIa Pars, 76.

¹⁶ See, for example, *ST*, Ia Pars, 8.2-3. Aquinas assumes that these diverse uses of presence are related analogically.

¹⁷ *ST*, Ia Pars, 8.3, corpus.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ *Ibid.* English translation by Thomas Gilby in Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, vol. 1: *The Existence of God; Part One: Questions 1–13* (New York: Doubleday Image Books, 1969), 133; emphasis added.

idea that for God “to exist in everything by substance and by presence are the same thing.”²⁰ It would be much more accurate, therefore, to say that “things exist in God rather than God in things (*magis res sunt in Deo, quam Deus in rebus*).”²¹

My point is that Thomas’s thought about how God acts in the sacraments is complex and dynamic. As in Calvin’s doctrine of God in the liturgy, sacrament has more to do with “an agent to be engaged” than with “a presence to be apprehended.”²² Thus, as we have seen, Thomas’s discussion of how God is present (he says, “exists”) in everything is grounded on an understanding of God’s causality as *dynamic agency* rather than mere “efficient instrument” or “static (unchanging) source.”²³ Presence must not be confused with place, time, power, or substance.²⁴ Moreover, Aquinas does not define either sacrament or liturgy starting from “presence,” and even the phrase “real presence” is more our term than his. He thinks sacrament starting from *action* (God’s agency at work in signs that “cause”),²⁵ and he thinks liturgy starting from *common participation* (by priests and people) *in the one priesthood of Christ*.²⁶ Thus, though we usually think presence means “occupying space (place),” it does not. And this has important implications for how God is met in liturgy. First, God’s “self-presence” is *relational* (constituting the persons of the Trinity), rather than physical and spatial. As a result, God’s self-communication happens not by filling up a place but, as Catherine Pickstock puts it, by *pre-occupying* space. God “occupies space even before there is a space, and occupies it more than it occupies itself. God is also preoccupied in rela-

²⁰ *ST*, Ia Pars, 8.3, obj. 2; English translation by Gilby (n. 18), 132.

²¹ *ST*, Ia Pars, 8.3, reply to obj. 3; English translation by Gilby (n. 18), 134.

²² Wolterstorff, “Not Presence But Action,” 21.

²³ *ST*, Ia Pars, 8.3. See also *ST*, Ia IIae Pars, 32.3, corpus (where Thomas outlines the fundamental ways “something may be present to us [*est aliquid praesens nobis*].”

²⁴ This has significant ramifications for Thomas’ later treatment of transubstantiation and Christ’s distinct mode of presence in the eucharistic species. The issue of “eucharistic real presence” will be the focus of a later “Amen Corner” column in this series on “revisiting presence.”

²⁵ *ST*, IIIa Pars, 60.1, 3.

²⁶ *ST*, IIIa Pars, 63.5, 6.

tion to space because He is displaced. He is permanently concerned with the Other. In Himself, [God] . . . is ecstatically preoccupied. So although God is not in a place . . . He is not non-spatial, for He situates sites themselves. And therefore He is the eminent (or pre-eminent) space of preoccupation, which gives space its job in advance of itself, which is to make space for worship."²⁷

In short, God's kenotic "self" is always a going-out toward others, and God's "place" is the opening of space for worship, doxology, praise. God's "presence" in the liturgy is thereby revealed as a "making room for others," as opening a hospitable "doxological domain" where *others* may meet. Presence is, therefore, a relational category; it is always presence *of*, presence *to*, presence *for*, and hence it inevitably implies "otherness," a point to which I will return later in this column.

A New Starting Point for Sacrament

What I have just written suggests some of the possibilities and perils of thinking sacrament by starting from Christ's power and presence, from sign and cause, or from sign, seal, and covenant. Reviewing the tradition of scholastic sacramental theology, Louis-Marie Chauvet argues, in *Symbol and Sacrament*, that by seeing sacraments as a "direct prolongation of Christology," theologians like Aquinas produced a system that was logically coherent but reductive: pneumatologically weak, "excessively separated from ecclesiology," and obsessed about juridical and institutional matters (e.g., the priest's power to confect the Eucharist; the precise moment of consecration).²⁸

A better starting point, Chauvet suggests, is the Pasch of Christ. "One of the most fundamental lessons of the Church's liturgical tradition from its earliest antiquity," he writes, "is that the point of departure for sacramental theology is not to be sought in the hypostatic union, but in the Pasch of Christ taken in its full scope

²⁷ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1998), 229.

²⁸ See the discussion in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 453–76.

(including, as a consequence, the Church or the Christian fact)."²⁹ It is Easter that illumines all other Christian mysteries (including the incarnation) and helps to explain both the formation of the gospels and the churches' diverse but related liturgical traditions. Both gospel and liturgy read history "*backwards* . . . starting from the resurrection of Jesus, the Crucified."³⁰ In thinking sacrament we should begin from Christ's Pasch and so "locate the sacraments within *the dynamic of a history*, that of a Church born, in its historic visibility, from the gift of the Spirit at Pentecost and always in the process of becoming the body of Christ all through history. To start from the Pasch is to be obliged to build sacramental theology not only on the *Christological* but also on the *pneumatological principle*."³¹

A Question not an Answer

Starting from Easter, however, does not mean beginning with trumpets, lilies, and shouts of victory. It means, instead, that *sacraments begin in scandal*—not the Christological scandal of two natures hypostatically united without confusion or separation, but a more radical crisis: "How must it be with God if we can confess God's full revelation in the human being Jesus, put to death in the name of the very law of God?"³² Yet the crisis precipitated by Jesus' crucifixion and death cannot be separated from its twin: his *disappearance*, his *empty tomb*.³³ Easter is a question, not an answer.

²⁹ Ibid., 476.

³⁰ Ibid., 486, 489.

³¹ Ibid., 487.

³² Ibid.

³³ It is possible that the empty tomb narrative, which we first encounter in Mark 16:1-8, was not the oldest way for Christians to grapple with Jesus' fate after his death. Daniel A. Smith suggests that the Sayings Gospel Q may have employed ancient Jewish speculation about the "assumption" of a prophet or sage as the prelude to that person's later eschatological mission (as God's "Coming One"). Assumption and resurrection reflect different theologies (and also different conclusions about the fate of Jesus' body), though in some early Christian sources, such as the Gospel of Luke, these are combined. Acts 2:23-24 and 4:10 suggest resurrection as God's post-mortem vindication of Jesus; Acts 2:31-35 suggests the theme of assumption as "exaltation," and

Given the religious expectations of many of Jesus' contemporaries, an empty tomb would have meant no corpse available to be purified by decomposition, no bones to be readied for resurrection by the rotting process.³⁴ In a word, Easter deepened and amplified—it did not resolve—the scandal facing Jesus' followers in the aftermath of the cross.

What must it mean, moreover, "that God raised this Jesus who had been crucified in the name of God's law? *Who*, then, is God if God has justified him who was . . . condemned for having blasphemed against God's own law? *Does God then contradict God?*"³⁵ A sacramental theology that begins with Christ's Pasch challenges our assumptions about God's very identity, requires us "to reach back to our presuppositions about God with a critical attitude," and prompts us to ask "What sort of God are we . . . speaking about if we . . . maintain, in faith, that God offers God's very self to be encountered through the mediation of the most material, the most corporeal, the most institutional of the Church's actions, the [liturgical and sacramental] rites?"³⁶

In a nutshell, the challenge facing the earliest Christians was how to "redesign" the figure of Jesus after his death and disappearance. As Marianne Sawicki suggests, the eucharistic table became the site where a significant amount of such "redesigning" went on as the gospel traditions were shaped and transmitted.³⁷ The table became, then, not only a cultic center where eucharistic thanksgiving

Acts 1:11 points to assumption as "expressive of eschatological significance" (Jesus who "went away" will come again). See Smith's article, "Revisiting the Empty Tomb: The Post-Mortem Vindication of Jesus in Mark and Q," *Novum Testamentum XLV* (2003): 123–37; here 133.

³⁴ See the discussion in Marianne Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord: Resurrection and Early Christian Practices* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press 1994), 280–89.

³⁵ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 488.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 498.

³⁷ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 263. To speak of "redesigning" Jesus does not dispute the reality of his bodily resurrection, but asks how Christians came to understand his availability—and their access to him—following God's "raising him up, releasing him from the throes of death, because it was impossible for him to be held by it" (Acts 2:24). For an example of how such redesigning may have shaped Mark's gospel, see *ibid.*, 294–95.

is made, but a site of recognition where Jesus himself is met “in the breaking of bread,” and where bewildered disciples could gather in fear and hope. It was not a peaceful place. For if, on one hand, the table was “God’s breast, where even little children may rest their heads” and Jesus’ feet “where instruction flows sweet as kisses and clean as tears,” that same site was also a “slippery slope”—at once a grapevine, a cup, a jar, a well of living water, an altar.³⁸ The Christian table became something “people have in common who think they have nothing in common”: “It is the leveling of all flesh by the body’s innate fragility and the ravages of time. It is a tabulation of race, class, and gender that reduces privilege to naught. It is the lowest common human denominator—hunger, disability, need—depicted in a riveted tableau of the universal death-bound condition. The Christian table is the home of the homeless, the larder of the poor. And theirs only.”³⁹

The table was thus a place of *risk*—for Jesus and for Christians. After all, *Jesus gave himself away at table*—and hence “table transactions signal the start of the diffusion of Jesus’ body: in word and narrative, in cult and sacrament,” and in surprising new social circumstances where the “first are last and the last are first.”⁴⁰ By saying “This is my body . . . this cup is the covenant in my blood,” Jesus began giving himself away at three tables simultaneously: the table of his word (in the gospel narratives), the table of his bread (broken for and among those gathered “in his name”), and the table of the poor, where hunger and thirst become the “baseline competence” needed to experience the Risen One. At these three tables, Marianne Sawicki suggests, we acquire competence to “see the Lord,” an embodied, “composite competence” arising from the “new literacy of God’s kingdom.”⁴¹ That third table—solidarity with the poor—is especially risky, for Christians are in the habit of viewing the poor as problems to be solved, clients to be managed and made more like us, eyesores to be cleaned up or cleared out.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 296.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 296–97.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 297.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

"We do not see," writes Sawicki, how the poor "are flesh of our flesh," transformed now "into the body of Christ, indispensable to the possibility of our ever looking Jesus in the face."⁴²

To think sacrament starting from Christ's Pasch is thus to begin with Christian *praxis*, where alone we can discover the living site of Easter faith, the place where "resurrection show[s] up in what the early Christians habitually did."⁴³ "Briefly and broadly," writes N.T. Wright, "they behaved as if they were in some important senses already living in God's new creation. They lived as if the covenant had been renewed, as if the kingdom were in a sense already present, though . . . future as well."⁴⁴ This resulted in a refiguring not only of Jesus, but of that "symbolic world" which Christians now "focused upon Jesus himself" and ritually embodied in "baptism and eucharist . . . consciously undertaken with reference to him."⁴⁵ Christians thus received their identity from the "Easter sacraments," much as Jesus's own identity as God's Word made flesh was established by "working backward" from cross and empty tomb. The *praxis* of Easter in the symbol-rich rites of word, water-bath, and table gave early Christians "a set of resurrection-shaped answers": "Who are we? Resurrection people: a people that is formed within the new world which began at Easter and which has embraced us, in the power of the Spirit, in baptism and faith. Where are we? In God's good creation, which is to be restored; in bodies that will be redeemed. . . . What's wrong? The work is incomplete: the project which began at Easter (the defeat of sin and death) has not yet been finished. What's the solution? The full and final redemption of the creation, and ourselves with it . . . when Jesus reappears . . . What time is it? In the overlap of the ages: the 'age to come,' longed for by Israel, has already begun, but the 'present age' still continues."⁴⁶ Far from immunizing Christians

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ N. T. Wright, *The Resurrection of the Son of God* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2003), 578.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Wright, *The Resurrection*, 580.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 582.

from history or liberating them from its concerns, the new life embodied in sacramental praxis committed them “to living and working within history, not to living in a fantasy-world where history had in principle already come to a stop and all that remained was for this to be worked out through the imminent end of the space-time universe.”⁴⁷

Easter Disrupts

But one must be cautious about concluding that the church’s sacraments somehow “recapitulate” the resurrection or that they represent the Christian’s own “personal Easter.” As Jean-Luc Marion argues, Easter *innovates*, and does so radically—so radically, in fact, that it “throws us forward” into “a world too new for us,” where we “must relearn everything” like children or the old, “overcome by newness.”⁴⁸ The fact that early Christians created *multiple* narratives about Jesus’ postmortem fate—appearances, ascension, assumption, exaltation, empty tomb, church-foundation stories—disables the fiction that we can fully comprehend what it means to say God “has glorified his servant Jesus” (Acts 3:13). Thus, the gospels’ Easter narratives not only “establish” structures, practices, and beliefs, they also disrupt and destabilize those “institutions.”⁴⁹ As Marianne Sawicki puts it,

The Gospels set things in order, but in a disruptive way. Jesus is copied [into stories] not in order to close the book on him but *so that he can overwrite* an ever-expanding community of human bodies. To imagine this, one has to keep in mind the superimposition of the ‘three’ Christian tables. Book is bread *is* the needy little ones. Each one keeps the others from closing in upon itself. Because of the book, we know that the bread is more than bread. Because of the bread, we know that the book is not about the past. Because of the needy little ones, we know what to do with the book and the bread.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Jean-Luc Marion, “The Gift of a Presence” in *Prologomena to Charity*, trans. Stephen Lewis (New York: Fordham University Press, 2002), 124.

⁴⁹ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 316.

The availability of Jesus as Risen Lord has to be understood as a relation of these three.⁵⁰

Thus, our accessibility to the Risen Christ depends on breaking open “the tomb of text,” an action accomplished day by day in the Christian liturgy, where the Lord’s promise to “be there” (Matt 18:20) takes flesh in suffering and hoping members, in the “least likely,” the littlest and most vulnerable.⁵¹

Traditional approaches to sacrament assume that the relation between word (sign) and reality (signified) is one of *reference*, and hence requires some sort of *causality* (whether instrumental/efficient or “symbolic”) if sign is ever to *effect* signified and so result in a *presence*. But another way to think presence is possible, one that begins not with signs and signification, but with *gift*. As I have noted often in this current series of columns, Jesus’ post-Easter “presence” is paradoxical; it is narrated through a discourse of departure, distance, disappearance, and absence. Luke’s gospel, for instance, ends with Jesus departing (Luke 24:51); yet at the same time the evangelist provides an important detail. Jesus *blesses* (Greek, εὐλογησεν) his disciples, and immediately after his being “taken up,” they return to Jerusalem “*blessing* (Greek, εὐλογουντες) God” (Luke 24:53). In this scene, framed by acts of blessing, Jean-Luc Marion sees a new model for understanding presence. “The presence of Christ,” he writes, “discloses itself by a gift: it can therefore be recognized only by a blessing”; it is a presence that can be seen only by being received, and can be “received only in being blessed.”⁵²

Christ’s departing act of blessing thus beckons repetition on our part: “Presence depends directly on blessing: there where men do not bless the Father, the Father cannot make himself present. . . . There is no presence of God among men, if men do not bless him and the one he has sent. . . . Not that the blessing of men functions as the condition for the possibility of the presence of Christ . . . [Rather,] His blessing by men constitutes the condition for the

⁵⁰ Ibid., 318, emphasis added.

⁵¹ Sawicki, *Seeing the Lord*, 316.

⁵² Marion, “The Gift of a Presence,” 129.

possibility not of the presence of Christ, but of Christ's being recognized by them. Christ can give the present of his presence without any condition; but so long as men do not bless God, this presence offered remains . . . rejected and disfigured."⁵³ The challenge facing disciples, then, is to "do as Jesus did," to repeat, "to bless to the point of acknowledging the gift of God. . . . Henceforward the disciples, that is to say the Church, that is to say humanity, finally reconciled with its destiny, . . . has but one function and one mission in a thousand different attitudes: to bless, so as thereby to welcome and acknowledge, the gift of the presence of God in and as his Christ."⁵⁴

In sum, Christ's departing act of blessing discloses, paradoxically, the gift of his bodily presence, of his bodily belonging to God in the glory of resurrection, of his being "exalted at the right hand of God" (Acts 2:33). In the very act of blessing (and departure), Christ makes himself "recognized" by his disciples: *full disclosure and absence/disappearance coincide*.⁵⁵ Thus, "the blessing, at the heart of which the Ascension is accomplished, cannot be separated from the Eucharistic blessing."⁵⁶ The connection between absence (ascension, departure) and presence (blessing) is crucial. What Christ does at table cannot directly manifest itself as an "object" (i.e., an artifact at the disposal of onlookers and participants). Jesus' action is *provocative*; it summons recognition and response. The given gift that blesses (Christ's glorified, ascended body) awakens our own act of blessing (repetition). Our eucharistic praise and thanksgiving thus embody our grateful "recognition of the gift of the presence of God in *this* man [Jesus the Christ], because this man can give himself to the point of abandoning himself like bread [that is broken and] distributed, abandoning himself like bread, like *this* bread, can concentrate all his presence in a gift, whether in a fleshly body or by taking body of the bread, always without any reserve whatsoever. In blessing, Christ makes himself recognized as gift of

⁵³ Ibid., 129; the lack of inclusive language is present in Lewis' English translation.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 130.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 133.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 132.

presence; the consecrated bread incarnates the perfectly abandoned gift of a 'body given for [us]' (Luke 22.19)."⁵⁷

So the presence of Christ in the Eucharist does, in fact, illumine the fundamental nature of *all* sacramental presence. The ascension, notes Marion, "does not signify the disappearance of Christ into the closed heavens, but the opening of heaven by a retreat that remains a mode of return. . . . The withdrawal of Christ does not make him less present, but more present than his physical presence permitted. Or rather, the new mode of his bodily presence (as the Eucharist) assures us, in the very withdrawal of the former body, a more insistent presence."⁵⁸

To think sacrament starting from gift means that our sacramental action is, then, neither an attempt to retrieve the past nor a self-congratulatory "summons" of Christ to indwell our present. In sacramental worship we recognize God's *gift given* as recognizable only in the "liturgy of the neighbor," only if we seek the face of Jesus in the least and littlest, in "one who stands among you whom you do not know" (John 1:26). As a result, Louis-Marie Chauvet is quite right to say that sacraments (especially, but not only, Eucharist) proclaim "the irreducibility of God . . . to our concepts, discourses, ideologies, and experiences."⁵⁹ Sacraments "disclose, even while concealing it, the difference of God."⁶⁰ They are thus "the most dangerous of the ecclesial mediations of the faith," for "nothing is nearer to us than the other in its very otherness . . . nothing is more present to us than what, in principle, escapes us."⁶¹ Because sacraments "resist every attempt at a definitive understanding" by the thinking human subject, they remain "the most radical mediation of the real's resistance to every attempt at a subjectivist reduction."⁶²

⁵⁷ Marion, 133.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 138.

⁵⁹ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 403.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 404.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 400–401.