

ILLUMINATING UNITY

Illuminating Unity

*Four Perspectives on Dei Verbum's
"One Table of the Word of God and
the Body of Christ"*

Rhodora E. Beaton



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Introduction

Illuminating Unity

On October 11, 1962, having attended the opening liturgy of the Second Vatican Council, French Dominican theologian Yves Congar reflected on the experience in his personal journal. He described the entrance of the bishops, the clapping of the crowd, and the singing of the *Veni Creator* by Pope John XXIII and the Sistine Choir. Commenting on the lack of intentional liturgical participation among the assembly, he observed that “the liturgical movement ha[d] not yet reached the Roman Curia.”¹ In addition to the lack of what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* would later call “full, conscious, and active” participation (SC 14),² Congar’s observations also include his lament that,

there is nothing here except for the eye and the musical ear: No liturgy of the Word. No spiritual word. I know that in a few minutes a Bible will be placed on a throne in order to preside over the Council. BUT WILL IT SPEAK? Will it be listened to? Will there be a moment for the Word of God?³

1. Yves Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, trans. Mary John Ronayne and Mary Cecily Boulding (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012), 56.

2. All excerpts from the documents of Vatican II in this book are taken from *Vatican Council II: The Basic Sixteen Documents; Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

3. Congar, *My Journal of the Council*, 87.

Congar's reflections illustrate the ritual enthronement of the gospels at the beginning of each congregation of the council as well as the attention to beauty, visible and musical, which was well developed in the Catholic sacramental tradition. His point, however, highlights that which was missing. The biblical word of God, while venerated, was "seen and not heard," even in the elaborate liturgy celebrated to open the council.

Building on the great progress made by the liturgical movement in the years prior to and following the Second Vatican Council, efforts to find "a moment for the Word of God" in Catholic liturgical practice continue. In many parishes, the training of lectors has become a priority. In some dioceses, preaching workshops are offered for priests and deacons who wish to improve their homiletic capabilities. Yet Congar's "moment" for the word of God has not yet been fully achieved in Catholic liturgical celebration. In his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis illustrated this struggle in his discussion of the significance of the homily in the liturgy. He writes, "We know that the faithful attach great importance to [the homily], and that both they and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them! It is sad that this is the case."⁴ The pope's wry acknowledgment of this problem points to the challenges that Catholics continue to face in celebrating a liturgy in which the Liturgy of the Word, including the preaching, is not merely regarded as "the unavoidable preparation for the sacrament"⁵ but is understood as inherent to the liturgical celebration as a whole.

In order to find a "moment" for the word of God and to develop the theological and liturgical infrastructure to support its continued recognition and reception, a new approach to the theological consideration of the relationship between word and sacrament is needed. This approach must be grounded in the liturgy, but avoid the hierarchical dualism which the traditional pairing of Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist sets up. Despite recent work to highlight the connections between what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* calls these "two parts" of the liturgy, which "are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship" (SC 56), centuries of Catholic emphasis on the Liturgy of

4. Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," *Origins* 43, no. 27–28 (2013): 135.

5. Karl Rahner, "The Word and the Eucharist," in *Theological Investigations 4* (New York: Crossroad, 1982), 257.

the Eucharist and Protestant emphasis on the Liturgy of the Word have set up a dualistic, and in some cases polemical, dynamic. A new model, however, is suggested in the metaphorical language of *Dei Verbum*, which reminds the faithful that their spiritual nourishment, the Bread of Life, is offered to them “from the one table of the word of God and Body of Christ” (DV 21). The image of this one table emphasizes the inherent unity of the liturgy and invites nondualistic theological reflection from a variety of perspectives. In an effort to reach a deeper understanding of the word of God, the body of Christ, and the unity of the liturgical celebration, we will consider the metaphor of the one table from four different perspectives: biblical prophecy, pneumatology, language, and sacramentality. Each perspective will draw from the depth and breadth of the theological tradition, highlighting areas of theological intersection.

While recognition of the unity of word and table is itself far from innovative—both Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas, among others, recognized it—the realization of this unity in theological and pastoral practice has been difficult to achieve in recent centuries.⁶ Modern-day efforts to reflect this unity in Catholic liturgical practices began with the work of theologians such as Otto Semmelroth, Karl Rahner, and Edward Schillebeeckx prior to the council. Each of these theologians wrote about the close relationship between word and sacrament, and the significance of the revelatory word of God in the liturgical context.

Semmelroth’s early argument in *The Preaching Word* illustrates the challenges any Catholic theologian faced in discussing the efficacy of the word of God prior to the Second Vatican Council. In 1962 Semmelroth wrote,

the assertion that the word of God, in distinction from the sacraments, is always without any efficacy for the imparting of grace is just as unacceptable as the assertion that wherever we find mention of the word of God, we are confronted with a mystery in which God imparts himself and his grace fully and unequivocally.⁷

6. For a detailed examination of sacramental approaches to the word of God in the classical, Reformation, and modern-day eras, see my *Embodied Words, Spoken Signs: Sacramentality and the Word in Rahner and Chauvet*, Emerging Scholars Series (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2014).

7. Otto Semmelroth, *The Preaching Word: On the Theology of Proclamation* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1965), 13.

Here Semmelroth argues simply for the possibility of the efficacy of the word of God, offered to humanity in a context distinct, although never entirely separated, from ritual sacramental words such as the words of institution. Semmelroth does not hesitate to acknowledge that such instances of the word of God—preaching or the proclamation of the Scriptures, for example—may be somewhat deficient in comparison with the ritual words. He argues simply for the *possibility* of the imparting of grace through the preached or proclaimed word, concluding that the most efficacious preaching is that which is most closely connected to the sacrament.⁸ Semmelroth's approach values the biblical word of God to the degree that it is related to the sacraments; this approach continues to ground much subsequent Roman Catholic work on the topic.

Semmelroth's work on the potential efficacy of preaching can be read in relation to the work of Karl Rahner and Edward Schillebeeckx, who also worked to revive a Roman Catholic theology of the word in the mid-twentieth century. Rahner's *logos* Christology grounds his understanding of liturgy and the sacraments in the theory of God's self-expression through the logos of God, which human beings are uniquely equipped to receive.⁹ Even as God expresses who God is in the logos, humans behave similarly when they speak the "primordial words"¹⁰ of poets to express the depths of what it means to be human. Arguing that the most potent of these words are found in the eucharistic words of institution, Rahner also acknowledges degrees of efficacy which may be found in other forms of human speech, including preaching and promises. Rahner's theology of the word suggests not only that preaching and proclamation can be efficacious experiences of the word of God but also that degrees of this efficacy can be found in the words of poets, lovers, and all human being who speak from the depths of their experience.

In the same decade, Edward Schillebeeckx expanded Catholic thinking on the sacraments in a manner which would pave the way for emerging sacramental theologies of the word. Schillebeeckx's understanding of the

8. *Ibid.*, 244.

9. Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity*, trans. William V. Dych (New York: Crossroad, 1997).

10. Karl Rahner, "Priest and Poet," in *Theological Investigations 3* (New York: Crossroad, 1967), 296.

sacraments as “encounters”¹¹ between God and humanity suggests an image of divine-human dialogue, which takes place through the exchange of words and symbols. Broadening the theological focus from the seven ritual sacraments, Schillebeeckx successfully argued that Christ could be understood as the “primordial sacrament”¹² and that the church itself be regarded as a kind of sacrament. This broad understanding of sacrament, which was reflected in both *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Lumen Gentium*, would help to ground the late twentieth-century interest in sacramentality, the recognition that all created reality has the potential to mediate the presence of God. It is within the theological understanding of sacramentality that many twentieth- and twenty-first-century Roman Catholic liturgical theologies of the word would find a home.

These Roman Catholic efforts to develop a sacramental theology of the word emerged in the context of the liturgical movement, the ecumenical movement, and the revival of Catholic biblical scholarship, which began with Pius XII’s encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*. The convergence of these movements became especially clear in the summer of 1963, which witnessed the first intersession of Vatican II, the World Council of Churches’ Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order in Montreal, Canada, and several Protestant denominational meetings to which Roman Catholic observers were invited.¹³ The Faith and Order meeting, which took up ecumenically significant topics such as worship and the relationship between Scripture and tradition, was particularly important. At the same time, Catholics, grieving the loss of John XXIII, were preparing for the second session of the Second Vatican Council to open under the leadership of Paul VI. This second session, which would conclude with the promulgation of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, also preceded a particularly fruitful period of work during the spring of 1964 on the *schema* on divine revelation. With a few individuals attending both the

11. Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God*, 1963 ed. (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 1999), 13–45.

12. *Ibid.*, 13–20.

13. Jan Grootaers, “Ebb and Flow Between Two Seasons,” in *The Formation of the Council’s Identity First Period and Intersession October 1962–September 1963*, ed. Guiseppe Alberigo and Joseph A. Komonchak, History of Vatican II, vol. 2 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1997), 535–46.

Faith and Order meeting and the Second Vatican Council,¹⁴ both the World Council of Churches and the Catholic Church spoke seriously about the need for liturgical unity as a prerequisite for doctrinal unity among the Christian churches. Each group also took up topics more commonly of concern to the other, with the WCC's Faith and Order Commission hearing reports on the relationship between Scripture and tradition, and with the Catholic Church discussing the significance of the word of God offered to humanity in the Scriptures.¹⁵

The significance of liturgical practice as a step toward ecumenical unity was of central concern at both meetings. In the "Foreword" to the compiled reports of the Theological Commission on Worship, Patrick Rodger observed that "it is surely in the realm of worship that the paradox of Christian unity and disunity can be most plainly seen." He went on to state that on the one hand, "when we 'go to the altar of God' a good many of the questions and arguments with which we entered are stilled . . . on the other hand, it is also notorious that it is in matters of worship . . . that the conservatism of Christian people operates most strongly against change, and therefore against that renewal by the Holy Spirit which . . . is agreed . . . to be the pre-requisite of unity."¹⁶ Rodger's acknowledgment points to one of the fundamental challenges of the convergence of the ecumenical and liturgical movements. On the one hand, it is in the liturgical encounter with God that we are most able to set technical matters of doctrine aside. On the other hand, as the old axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi* reminds us, it is in the ingrained habits of prayer and ritual practice that Christians find and nurture their particular identities as Christians. The risk of changing these habits seems, perhaps rightly, very

14. These included Johannes Willebrands, Secretary for the Vatican's Secretariat for Christian Unity, and Lukas Vischer of the World Council of Churches' Faith and Order Commission.

15. As Gregory Baum would put it in an August 1963 article in *Commonweal*, "We have here undoubtedly an area of ecumenical triumph. Catholics and Protestants have recognized that their understanding of tradition and its relation to the Scriptures has largely been colored by polemical preoccupations." Gregory Baum, "A Broadening of the Base: Montreal: Faith and Order," *The Commonweal* 78, no. 19 (1963): 510.

16. Patrick C. Rodger, and Regin Prenter, J. Russell Chandran, Joseph Sittler, *Paper 39. Report of the Theological Commission on Worship* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Commission on Faith and Order, 1963).

great. Liturgical change, therefore, is often a slow and difficult process. Despite these difficulties, both the Faith and Order Commission and the Second Vatican Council continued to pursue the dual goals of liturgical reform and liturgical unity. The first paragraph of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, which states among its goals the explicit intention “to encourage whatever can promote the union of all who believe in Christ,” concludes by noting that “accordingly [the council] sees particularly cogent reasons for undertaking the reform and promotion of the liturgy” (SC 1). Here, as with the Faith and Order Commission, liturgical reforms were undertaken with the goal of Christian unity in mind.

While the hopes for unity were of great significance, it was also the case that in their official documents, both Catholics and Protestants were acknowledging the inadequacy of their current forms of worship. The Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches observed “that the liturgical forms and language of the churches, including that of preaching, are everywhere in need of transformation . . . [adding that these liturgical] traditions are inadequate for the current mission of the church.”¹⁷ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* stated similarly that “it is the wish of the church to undertake a careful general reform of the liturgy in order that the Christian people may be more certain to derive an abundance of graces from it” (SC 21). Liturgical reforms across denominations were thus undertaken, sometimes—as in the case of the International Consultation on Common Texts, a reform in which ICEL participated—in direct ecumenical collaboration.¹⁸ A renewal of preaching and increased participation on the parts of the faithful were significant results of these reforms.

Such ecumenical efforts to promote Christian unity through liturgical reform occurred in tandem with discussions of doctrinal and cultural issues which had separated Protestants and Catholics since the Reformation. Primary among these in 1963 were the doctrinal issues surrounding the relationship between Scripture and tradition, which had played out

17. *Ibid.*, 69.

18. Horace T. Allen, “Common Lectionary and Protestant Hymnody: Unity at the Table of the Word—Liturgical and Ecumenical Bookends,” in *Liturgical Renewal as a Way to Christian Unity*, ed. James F. Puglisi (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2005), 63.

in the liturgical practices of Catholics and Protestants since the sixteenth century. Addressing these difficulties directly, the Faith and Order Commission of the World Council of Churches began its discussion on the topic of tradition in the summer of 1963. Distinguishing between tradition (lowercase, singular), which designates “the traditionary process operating in human history and society,”¹⁹ traditions (lowercase, plural), which denote the different types of denominational traditions, including liturgical traditions,²⁰ and *the Tradition* (capitalized, singular), which is “of divine origination,” and is “the referent to which the plural traditions refer if they can rightly be classed as mutually related to each other,”²¹ the European report on tradition also addressed the neuralgic issue of the relationship between Scripture and tradition, concluding that all Christians exist “by the Tradition of the Gospel testified in Scripture.”²² Emphasizing the connection between liturgy and doctrine, the commission clarified that this tradition is “actualized in the preaching of the Word, in the administration of the sacraments and worship” as well as in “theology, missionary work, and the overall life of the church.”²³ As the European report on worship put it, “thus both in the Gospel proclaimed and in the sacrament performed there is present one and the same God. . . . But it is proper to say that Christ is present in different modes.”²⁴ This understanding of the presence of God, experienced by humanity in Gospel and sacrament, reflects the liturgical realization of the convergence in doctrinal understanding of the relationship between Scripture and tradition.

19. World Council of Churches, *The Report of the Theological Commission on Tradition and Traditions: Fourth World Conference on Faith and Order, Montreal, Canada, 12–26 July, 1963*, Faith and Order Paper no. 40 (Geneva: World Council of Churches, Faith and Order Commission, 1963), 16.

20. *Ibid.*, 17.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*

24. Günther Gassmann, *Documentary History of Faith and Order, 1963–1993*, Faith and Order Paper no. 159 (Geneva: WCC Publications, 1993), 12. The report concluded that “it is not profitable to compare the intensity of the various modes of his presence, and this error has been at the root of many past controversies.”

In a parallel discussion, the Second Vatican Council debated what the Council of Trent and the First Vatican Council had referred to as supernatural revelation offered “in written books and in unwritten traditions.”²⁵ After a total of four drafts, *Dei Verbum*, the Constitution on Divine Revelation, described Scripture and tradition as “the single sacred deposit of the word of God which is entrusted to the church,” concluding that with the magisterium of the church, they “are so connected and associated that one of them cannot stand without the others. Working together, each in its own way under the action of the one Holy Spirit, they all contribute effectively to the salvation of souls” (DV 10). *Dei Verbum*, in continuity with *Sacrosanctum Concilium*,²⁶ likewise attended to the significance of the liturgy, emphasizing the need for scriptural preaching (DV 21, 23–25) and suggesting the possibility of ecumenical translation projects (DV 22). Turning, as the World Council of Churches discussion did, to the topic of the presence of Christ in the liturgy, the Second Vatican Council also expressed an expanded understanding of God’s presence in the liturgy, explaining that

Christ is always present in his church, especially in liturgical celebrations. He is present in the sacrifice of the Mass, both in the person of his minister . . . and most of all in the eucharistic species. By his power he is present in the sacraments so that when anyone baptizes it is really Christ himself who baptizes. He is present in his word, since it is he himself who speaks when the holy scriptures are read in church. Lastly he is present, when the church prays and sings.” (SC 7)

This famous fourfold expression of the presence of Christ in the liturgy opened the doors for a greater respect for the proclamation and preaching of the word in Catholic liturgical practice, as well as for the full, conscious, active participation of the laity (SC 14) in the church’s communal prayer and song. As was the case with the Faith and Order reports, the doctrinal consideration of the relationship between Scripture and tradition carried

25. See “Canons and Decrees of the Council of Trent,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 663–64; and “Dei Filius,” in *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, ed. Norman P. Tanner, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: Sheed and Ward, 1990), 804–11.

26. *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, see especially paragraphs 7, 24, 35, 51–52.

liturgical implications for the recognition of the presence of God in the liturgy as a whole.

In addition to their statements about preaching, sacramental celebration, and the fourfold presence of Christ in the liturgical celebration, both *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and *Dei Verbum* also addressed the unified structure of the liturgy itself. This theological move was crucial for the realization of Congar's hope that Catholics would experience "a moment for the Word of God." As long as the Liturgy of the Word could be regarded as separate and inferior to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the moment for the word of God would remain elusive. In the fall of 1963, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was promulgated and included the claim that "The two parts which in a sense go to make up the Mass, vis. the liturgy of the word and the eucharistic liturgy, are so closely connected with each other that they form but one single act of worship" (SC 56). In his commentary on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Josef Jungmann observed that the intention of this passage was "to thwart the frivolous view of the Sunday obligation, according to which it is sufficient to be present at the sacrificial part of the Mass."²⁷ The reference to the "single act of worship" expressed the unity of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist, and thereby elevated the operative understanding of the significance of the Liturgy of the Word. This trajectory, also evident in *Dei Verbum*, would prove to be deeply significant for ecumenical dialogue.

By the time the council came to its conclusion, a stronger image for liturgical unity emerged from the tradition as a bookend to *Sacrosanctum Concilium*'s "two parts" (SC 56). Promulgated at the end of the final session of the council, *Dei Verbum* built on the foundation of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and referred to the Bread of Life which is offered "to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the Body of Christ" (DV 21). This image, taken from the biblical christological reference to Jesus as the "Bread of Life" (John 6:35), is also developed in a series of sermons Augustine preached on the Lord's Prayer. In these sermons, Augustine begins by speaking of the daily bread which is "receive[d] from the altar," but quickly makes the connection to "the word of God

27. Josef Andreas Jungmann, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy," in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 1 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1967), 42.

which is proclaimed every day, that too is bread. [He adds] The fact that it isn't bread for the belly doesn't mean that it isn't bread for the mind."²⁸ Here the image of bread is applied both to the Eucharist and to the word of God. In *Dei Verbum*, the image of the Bread of Life offered from the "one table" expresses the inherent unity of the word of God and the body of Christ as they are experienced in the liturgy.²⁹ Even more strongly than *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, it highlights the unity of the single act of worship and the corresponding unity of the single deposit of the word of God (DV 10) as experienced in Scripture and tradition. Echoing Jungmann's point on *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, Joseph Ratzinger points out that despite concerns that the retrieved image of the "one table" would detract from the significance of transubstantiation, those in favor of it argued for it in part because the image was intended to make clear that

the liturgy of the word was not just a preliminary part of the Mass that could be more or less dispensed with, but of fundamentally equal value with the liturgy that is sacramental in the narrower sense; that the Church, as the community of the body of Christ, is definitely also the community of the Logos, living on the word, so that the "flesh" and

28. Augustine, "Sermon 59," in *Sermons 51-94 (III/3)*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1991), 6.

29. Both Augustine and *Dei Verbum* are clear, however, that the ultimate source of nourishment and revelation is neither word nor sacrament, but Christ the living water. In an earlier homily Augustine develops the eschatological context asking "are we going to go on receiving the eucharist when we have come to Christ himself, and when we have begun to reign with him forever? So the eucharist is our daily bread; but we should receive it in such a way that our minds and not just our bellies find refreshment. . . . But when we finally get there, do you imagine we shall be listening to a book? We shall be seeing the Word itself, listening to the Word itself, eating it, drinking it, as the angels do now. Do the angels need books, or lectures, or readers? Of course not, they read by seeing, since they see the Truth itself, and drink their fill from that fountain, spray which sprinkles us." See Augustine, "Sermon 57," in *Sermons 51-94 (III/3)*, ed. John E. Rotelle, trans. Edmund Hill, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1991), 7. Similar images can be found in the writings of Jerome. See also DV 3.

“word” in which the “body of Christ,” the word made flesh, comes to us becomes our “bread.”³⁰

The image of the “one table” thus had implications both for the liturgy and for the church’s broader understanding of itself. Modifying what Ratzinger referred to as the church’s “over-exclusively sacramental way”³¹ of understanding itself, the image of the “one table” reoriented the Catholic Church back toward an understanding of itself as nourished not only by the Eucharist but also by the word of God.

The positive effects of this image are clear in the post-Vatican II developments in Catholic liturgical life and theology. Increased attention to the Liturgy of the Word has led to an expanded selection of lectionary texts and a greater emphasis on training for preachers. Catholics of all kinds read the Bible in increasing numbers and self-report that they choose parishes at least in part because of appreciation for the preaching.³² The image of the “one table,” drawn from the traditions of the fourth and fifth centuries, recontextualized in the mid-twentieth-century work of Semmelroth, Rahner, and Schillebeeckx and included in the conciliar documents, provides a foundation from which to build a theology of the word that accounts for sacramentality as well as texts. From this starting point, Catholic theologians have developed diverse theologies of preaching and robust sacramental theologies of language. A deeper appreciation of the ways that symbols function in language has helped theologians to think of sacraments as language events,³³ to consider liturgical and scriptural texts in the context of the church,³⁴ and to reflect on the symbolic qualities

30. Joseph Ratzinger, “Commentary on *Dei Verbum*,” in *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, ed. Herbert Vorgrimler, vol. 3 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), 263.

31. *Ibid.*

32. Mark M. Gray, Mary L. Gautier, and Melissa A. Cidade, “Views from the Pews: Parishioner Evaluations of Parish Life in the United States” (National Association for Lay Ministry; Emerging Models of Pastoral Leadership Project, 2013), 38.

33. See, for example, David N. Power, “Sacrament: Event Eventing,” in *A Promise of Presence*, ed. Michael Downey and Richard Fragomeni (Washington, DC: The Pastoral Press, 1992).

34. See, for example, Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994).

of revelation.³⁵ Catholics across the board have come to understand sacraments not only as rituals but also as events and encounters with God.

As the fiftieth anniversary of *Dei Verbum* approaches, it is clear that while much work has been done, much remains. Mindful of the dualities which can emerge when Scripture and tradition, word and element, Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist are considered in pairs, this volume will begin with the image from *Dei Verbum* of the “one table of the word of God and Body of Christ”; it will consider the “one table” as a whole from a variety of different perspectives, each of which will highlight the unity of the liturgy. In approaching the complexity of divine revelation offered to Christians in word and sacrament, no one perspective can be entirely adequate. Several starting points from around the table, however, can offer insights which remain hidden when one starts with either word or sacrament as primary.

Chapter 1 of this book begins with a consideration of the lens of biblical prophecy as a means for illuminating the inherent unity of the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist. The prophetic perspective, spanning centuries, biblical books, and liturgical divisions, highlights the similarities between eucharistic symbols and the gestures, words, and actions of the Old Testament prophets. It suggests that in the celebration of the Eucharist, modern Christians can and should see their actions and responsibilities in continuity with the biblical prophets. The links between prophetic and sacramental, Scripture and tradition, ritual practice and everyday life offer a deeper understanding of the proclaimed word and the inherent unity of the liturgical actions spanning time and space.

Building on an understanding of prophetic action driven by the work of the Holy Spirit, the second chapter turns a pneumatological lens on liturgical celebration. Here we will consider the Spirit found in points of difference which can be understood as unifying intersections. Relying on Louis-Marie Chauvet’s system of symbolic exchange, which illustrates the role of the Spirit as creator of unity in difference, we will examine liturgical intersections found not only in the space between the Liturgy of the Word and the Liturgy of the Eucharist but also in the points of

35. See, for example, Avery Dulles, “The Symbolic Structure of Revelation,” *Theological Studies* 41, no. 1 (March 1980); Avery Dulles, *Models of Revelation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1992).

difference between liturgical roles and between the ritual celebration and the Christian life. Understood as places of the Spirit, these points of difference become building blocks of unity both for the local community and for the larger church and world.

The third chapter will consider the liturgy through the broad lens of language. Acknowledging the complexity of human language comprised of words, inflections, gestures, and signs, this chapter reflects on the similarities and differences between divine and human language as they have been experienced in Jewish and Christian history. Drawing from the work of Philo and Augustine, as well as from Karl Rahner and other more modern sources, the chapter examines the transformative power of language as it is experienced today in the liturgical context and in what Rahner calls the liturgy of the world.

The fourth chapter provides the broadest lens, considering liturgical unity in light of the sacramentality of all creation. Drawing from sources as diverse as the biblical wisdom tradition, Thomas Aquinas, and the work of Rahner and Chauvet, this chapter suggests that when the liturgy is considered in the graced context of all creation, its inherent unity and *raison d'être* are revealed. Linking creation, liturgy, and care for the world, the inherent unity of the Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist can be more clearly appreciated as the source and summit of Christian life when it is seen in a relationship of unity with the Christian life.

As these four perspectives will illuminate, the unity of word and sacrament, Liturgy of the Word and Liturgy of the Eucharist, is best understood when it is approached as *one* table encompassing signs, symbols, words, gestures, actions, encounters, homilies, conversations, meals, and texts. The liturgical metaphor pressed into service to describe revelatory experience expands our understanding of the liturgy as well as of the broader topic of God's revelation offered to humanity in history. When considered together, the four perspectives challenge prior understanding and open the way for a new "moment" of the word of God considered in unifying relationship in the liturgy and in Christian life.

chapter 1

Realizing Unity

The One Table of the Prophetic Word and Body of Christ¹

In order to better glimpse the unity of word and sacrament, we turn first to a viewpoint that is most frequently associated with the word of God and biblical revelation. The prophetic word of God, which many Catholics encounter primarily in the first reading of the Liturgy of the Word, is often experienced as a blur of strange place names and images, which once heard are soon forgotten. Few homilists undertake to explain or contextualize the odd and sometimes disturbing words and actions of the ancient biblical prophets. By relegating “prophecy” to the exclusive realm of the beginning stages of the Liturgy of the Word, however, we may miss the prophetic words and actions which can be found elsewhere in the liturgy, as well as in the overall Christian call to conversion. When trained on the liturgy as a whole, the lens of biblical prophecy illuminates the unity of action which exists between contemporary celebrations of the Eucharist and the equally radical and symbol-charged actions of the biblical prophets. By considering *Dei Verbum*’s “one table” (DV 21), we will come to see the depths of the whole more clearly.

1. An earlier version of this chapter was published as “Realizing Unity: The One Table of the Prophetic Word and Body of Christ,” *Worship* 86, no. 4 (2012): 323–38. Used by permission.

2 *Illuminating Unity*

A member of a religious community once commented that prophets are great until you have to live in the same house with one of them. It was not primarily the *words* of the prophet that created cause for concern. Reflection on some of the great prophetic voices of our own time, Martin Luther King, Dorothy Day, Archbishop Oscar Romero, or other prophetic figures in our lives, reveals that the voices of these prophets, while significant, are really only the tip of the iceberg—it is their *actions* which lead to transformative discomfort. Public marches in the face of dogs and fire hoses. The poor and hungry not on the receiving end of a check, but sleeping on the couch, eating at the dining room table, and requesting seconds. People are not considered “prophetic” unless their words are accompanied and supported by actions which are often equally shocking, disconcerting, and ultimately, transformative. In this chapter we will turn first to the work of biblical scholars for insights into the content of the prophetic books often associated with the beginning of the Liturgy of the Word. In the second section, we will examine the symbolic actions of Jesus, particularly those of the Last Supper, through the lens of biblical prophecy. This will lead to a consideration of the prophetic context of eucharistic origins, and by extension, the church itself. The conclusion will consider the liturgical significance, including implications for preaching, of regarding this “one table” through a prophetic lens.

Prophecy as Revelatory of the Presence of God

Biblical scholars point out that while the prophetic books contain many oracles (“the word of the Lord” formula which is often associated with prophecy), they also contain equally significant narrative accounts of prophetic actions. These actions can function symbolically to reveal God’s desires and intentions. They can also transform and mediate the human encounter with God through symbols and symbolic actions. The work of Scripture scholars helps to illustrate some of the ways in which the prophetic words and actions described in the Old Testament can be understood as indications and mediations of the transforming presence of God in the centuries before the birth of Christ.

The conventions of liturgical proclamation as well as those of prophetic oracles tend to highlight the verbal and textual elements of the prophetic narratives. In the liturgical context, the lector ascends to the ambo, adjusts

the book, and announces: “A reading from the book of the prophet ——.” The text is proclaimed from the book, according to the approved translation. The lector concludes with the phrase “The Word of the Lord.” The significance of the book and the task of reading are emphasized. Similar conventions found in the narratives themselves have led listeners to focus on the verbal oracles confided by God to the prophets. These oracles are demarcated by what scholars call a “word-event formula.”² The formula, “the word of the Lord came to me” (e.g., Ezek 6:1), serves to indicate that what follows are to be understood as the words of God proclaimed to the people by means of human language. As Luke Timothy Johnson says, “[t]he human words spoken by the prophet can be called ‘God’s word’ because they communicate to other humans God’s perspective on the human situation they share, communicating as well God’s vision for a humanity that present circumstances impede.”³ Given this emphasis on the words themselves, it can be too easy to dismiss the dramatic actions as marginal decorations to prophecy, rather than more accurately to regard them as part of the prophetic event itself.

In many cases, however, the words of Scripture also serve to convey the reality of prophetic actions which mediate revelation. In order to examine the dynamic and symbolic qualities of biblical prophecy, we now turn specifically to the topic of prophetic symbols and actions. In addition to the better known prophetic oracles, biblical scholars also speak of prophetic actions or dramas,⁴ which can serve as vehicles of revelation. David Stacey offers the following general description of such an event: “When a prophetic drama takes place, an action, a person or persons, and possibly an object belonging to the everyday world are deliberately brought into relationship with some unseen event or reality, usually something on a much larger scale than the drama itself. The dramas point away from themselves toward the unseen element in the conjunction.”⁵

2. James Robson, *Word and Spirit in Ezekiel*, ed. Claudia Camp and Andrew Mein, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies (New York: T&T Clark, 2006), 37.

3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church: the Challenge of Luke-Acts to Contemporary Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), 44.

4. Stacey prefers the term “drama.” See: W. David Stacey, *Prophetic Drama in the Old Testament* (London: Epworth Press, 1990), 21–22.

5. *Ibid.*, 260.

4 *Illuminating Unity*

Key to this description are the roles of the ordinary action, person, or object, the relationship of the visible element to the invisible reality, and the universal significance of the event. These characteristics, which are strikingly similar to the characteristics of the sacraments, indicate the presence of prophetic revelation. The results of the divine encounter can vary significantly depending on the circumstances and, presumably, God's intentions. Biblical scholars speak of several different categories of prophetic actions, each of which reveals something about God and which simultaneously effects change in the individual and in the community.

The first category of prophetic action to which we will turn is that of "prophetic actions which point to a divine activity which cannot otherwise be observed."⁶ This type of prophetic action reveals God's intentions for humanity, and frequently contains a warning to turn away from sin. Morna Hooker offers the example of the prophet Jeremiah, who smashes pottery in order to indicate God's otherwise unobservable intentions for humanity. Jeremiah is instructed to "Go, buy a potter's earthenware flask. . . . And you shall break the flask . . . and say to them: Thus says the LORD of hosts: Thus will I smash this people and this city, as one smashes a clay pot so that it cannot be repaired" (Jer 19:1, 10-12). Here Jeremiah's action is indicative of God's intentions regarding the destruction of Israel.⁷ His words convey part of the message, but it is the symbolic action which underlines and illustrates the message. In this case, the action functions as a warning which urges change through the revelation of God's intentions for Jerusalem. It reveals God's intention, which could not otherwise be known, but does not in itself effect change.

Other categories of prophetic action do more than simply illustrate God's intentions. In some cases the prophet, through his or her actions and experiences, reveals and mediates the salvific presence of God in specific events. Hooker describes these as prophetic actions which "mediate manifestations of divine power in events which bring with them either salvation or judgment."⁸ These actions have been understood by the community as God's direct intervention in history through the prophets.

6. Morna Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet: The Prophetic Actions of Jesus* (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1997), 3.

7. *Ibid.*

8. *Ibid.*

One example of this type of prophetic action is the description of Moses' actions at the parting of the Red Sea. Moses' act of stretching out his hand illustrates and makes present the power of the figurative hand of God. Although it is Moses' own physical hand which is stretched out, the text interprets this action as the action of God: "Your right hand, O LORD, magnificent in power, your right hand, O LORD, shattered the enemy" (Exod 15:6). Moses' action is both indicative of God's presence and also brings with it immediate salvation: the Israelites are physically rescued and also recognize God's hidden actions on their behalf.

In still other cases, rather than an intervening action, it is a symbolic vision which conveys the transformative presence of God to humanity. Joseph Blenkinsopp explores the ways in which prophetic symbols operate to convey this transformative presence in the book of Ezekiel. Ezekiel's account of his vision of the valley of bones creates an image for the community:

A sound started up, as I was prophesying, rattling like thunder. The bones came together, bone joining to bone. As I watched, sinews appeared on them, flesh grew over them, skin covered them on top, but there was no breath in them. Then he said to me: Prophecy to the breath, prophesy, son of man! Say to the breath: Thus says the Lord GOD: From the four winds come, O breath, and breathe into these slain that they may come to life. I prophesied as he commanded me, and the breath entered them; they came to life and stood on their feet, a vast army. (Ezek 37:7-10)

In the words of Blenkinsopp, Ezekiel "has provided a powerful visual symbol of the reversal of the life-death process, or the belief in physical resurrection, or the vivifying power of God throughout Jewish and Christian history. . . . The . . . community which has lost its will to survive, is vivified by the spirit activated through the word of God addressed to the community."⁹ Here the *image* of the valley of dry bones, offered to Ezekiel in a prophetic vision, acts as a transformative symbol. The image is first manifested visually and aurally to Ezekiel in his prophetic vision. It is then conveyed, by means of descriptive words, to the community.

9. Joseph Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, rev. and enlarged ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 178.

This prophetic word-image “vivifies” the community; it transforms them, and has the capacity to do so because it is a manifestation of the power and presence of the Spirit in history.

In the case of Ezekiel’s experience, both the symbolic vision and the descriptive words which convey the vision function for the transformation of the community. It can also be the case that the prophet himself or herself is transformed by the prophetic experience and thus becomes a living symbol of God’s revelatory presence in the community. This “prophetic way of being in the world,” as Johnson puts it, “brings God’s will into human history through the words, yes, but also the deeds and character of the prophet.”¹⁰ Blenkinsopp offers one example of this in his discussion of the prophet Jeremiah, noting that in the case of Jeremiah, “the person, as much as the spoken word, is the message.”¹¹ Jeremiah’s many prophetic actions, the loincloth which he purchased and buried until it rotted (Jer 13:1-11), the earthenware flask which he shattered in the sight of the elders at the Potsherd Gate (Jer 19:1-13), the thongs and yoke-bars which he wore to symbolize servitude to the king of Babylon (Jer 27-28), are not isolated symbolic actions. Together, these actions reflect “the adoption of a certain style of living that dramatizes the rejection of what passes for reality in the society as a whole.”¹² Jeremiah’s actions point toward a reality that had gone unnoticed by most of the people around him. In the destruction of everyday objects and the wearing of a yoke, Jeremiah’s life pointed toward the reality of the deterioration and enslavement of Israel. As Stacey puts it, “the prophet was thought to be so closely in touch with the unseen powers that they were constantly showing themselves through him and to him.”¹³ This overarching way of life reflects the integration of human personhood as mediator of the divine will. The prophet’s very life has become indistinguishable from the prophetic message and is, in the words, actions, and experiences which

10. Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*, 41.

11. *Ibid.*, 146.

12. *Ibid.*, 61.

13. Stacey, *Prophetic Drama*, 67. Elsewhere Stacey states: “The prophet was *himself* a symbol. By his very presence in society, he represented the immanence, the power, and the unpredictability of the divine word” (*ibid.*, 61).

comprise it, itself a transformative symbol of God's revealing and transformative presence in the world.

As a careful look at these examples makes clear, the word of God proclaimed in biblical prophecy is not a disembodied word but an encounter with God which reveals both God's hidden intentions and God's participation in human history. This revelation sometimes comes in the words of prophetic oracles, but it also comes through prophetic actions, symbolic visions, and perhaps most strongly when the prophet him or herself is so united with the will of God that the individual's entire life becomes a prophetic symbol for God's presence in human history.

The Prophetic and Sacramental Life of Jesus

As we have seen, biblical prophecy is not an exclusively verbal undertaking. While prophetic oracles are certainly to be found in Scripture, they are also frequently accompanied by prophetic actions involving symbols. These oracles, actions, and symbols are often found in the life context of an individual whose entire existence has become a symbol of God's revealed presence and intentions. Viewed through the lens of biblical prophecy, Jesus of Nazareth provides an important example of this type of prophet. This section will first consider some actions of Jesus of Nazareth as prophetic according to the categories sketched above. We will then turn specifically to the actions of Jesus within the context of the Last Supper to consider the sacramental origins of Eucharist from the perspective of prophetic action. Finally we will look at the prophetic and sacramental implications for the church.

New Testament scholars point out that the title of prophet was most likely one of the earliest titles applied to the person of Jesus of Nazareth. Citing such actions as Jesus' entry into Jerusalem and the clearing of the temple, Stacey observes that the crowds depicted in the Gospels "would surely have seen him as a new kind of prophetic person at the very least."¹⁴ In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter reports that people think Jesus is Elijah, or Jeremiah, or one of the prophets (Matt 16:14; cf. Mark 6:15; 8:28; Luke 9:8, 19). The crowds may not yet understand fully, but they are certainly

14. W. David Stacey, "The Lord's Supper as Prophetic Drama: The A. S. Peake Memorial Lecture, 1993," *Epworth Review* 21, no. 1 (1994): 68.

acting within reason to think that Jesus is a prophet. Hooker points to the example of the withering of the fig tree in the Gospel of Mark as an example of a prophetic action which indicates God's previously hidden intent to destroy Jerusalem.¹⁵ Johnson observes a trajectory in the Gospel of Luke in which Jesus is recognized as a prophet in the contexts of a healing miracle (Luke 7:16), in a discussion of his identity (Luke 9:8, 19), and finally in the postresurrection account of the journey to Emmaus when the disciples speak of their leader as "a man who was a prophet, mighty in deed and word" (Luke 24:19).¹⁶

Jesus' own self-understanding also seems to reflect the significance of the prophetic role. In Luke's account of Jesus' rejection at Nazareth, we find Jesus observing that "no prophet is accepted in his own native place" (Luke 4:24). Later in the Gospel of Luke, Jesus predicts his passion in prophetic terms, saying that he must continue on because it is "impossible that a prophet should die outside of Jerusalem" (Luke 13:33).¹⁷ John Meier suggests that throughout his earthly life, "Jesus well understood and often engaged in prophetic-symbolic gestures that proclaimed, and to some degree actualized, the kingdom."¹⁸ Although it is impossible to be certain of Jesus' intentions in performing these gestures, his words and actions are indicative of the lifestyle of an Israelite prophet and of his understanding of himself in similar terms.

From the Christian perspective, the life of Jesus is a clear example of what we have called a prophetic lifestyle in which "the person, as much as the spoken word, is the message."¹⁹ Jesus is more than a prophet, yet, in a comparison with the traits of biblical prophets as they are described in the Old Testament, the life, words, and, actions of Jesus clearly fit the

15. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 44. John Meier lists among Jesus' prophetic actions: "his prohibition of fasting coupled with his festive meals with toll collectors and sinners, his exorcisms, his 'triumphal' entry into Jerusalem, his 'cleansing' of the Jerusalem temple, and the symbolic gestures over bread and wine at the Last Supper." John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 3: *Companions and Competitors*, The Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 153.

16. See Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*, 30.

17. See *ibid.*

18. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3: *Companions and Competitors*, 153.

19. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 146.

bill. As Johnson points out, Jesus is not only described as a prophet but also directly compared to the greatest of the Israelite prophets, Moses, and to “the two prophets whose exploits in Scripture are themselves based on Moses, namely Elijah and Elisha.”²⁰ These comparisons serve to indicate that Jesus functions as a particular type of prophet who heals the people like Elijah and Elisha (1 Kgs 17:8-16; 2 Kgs 5:1-14), ascends to God like Elijah (2 Kgs 2:11), is closely linked to the Spirit of God like Elisha (2 Kgs 2:9-12), and, like Moses, both leads the people forward and is associated with powerful forms of divine revelation such as the Ten Commandments given on the mountain (Exod 20:1-21). While the healing miracles occur primarily in the earlier parts of the gospel accounts, Jesus’ close association with the Holy Spirit spans the course of his ministry from baptism to ascension. His leadership capacity, present throughout his lifetime, becomes even more important in the final days of his life when he prepares his disciples for the events which will occur.

We now turn specifically to the Last Supper, an event which clearly demonstrates the convergence of prophetic action and Christian sacrament. As noted above, Stacey’s characteristics of prophetic drama require that the event involve “an action, a person or persons, and possibly an object belonging to the everyday world [which] are deliberately brought into relationship with some unseen event or reality, usually something on a much larger scale than the drama itself. The dramas point away from themselves towards the unseen element in the conjunction.”²¹ In the case of the Last Supper, the most significant elements of this prophetic drama are the presence and significance of the Twelve, the actions of the sharing of the bread and cup, and the overarching context of the Passover, which points to the universal implications of the drama.

In the event of the Last Supper, the Twelve play a critical role. On the one hand, they are the close and rather ordinary friends and followers of Jesus gathered for a meal. On the other hand, they also function symbolically, representing humanity both past (the twelve tribes of Israel) and future (the beginning of the church). As Meier puts it, “the mere fact that Jesus the eschatological prophet chose to select twelve Israelite men from among his disciples to form a special group would, in the eyes of his

20. See Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*, 30.

21. Stacey, *Prophetic Drama* 260.

adherents, set in motion the regathering of the twelve tribes, even before these twelve men actually did anything.”²² The fact that the Twelve are already functioning as a prophetic symbol, both passively in their number, and more actively in their work as assistants in the public ministry of Jesus,²³ is important. Their prophetic role can be seen to increase after they undergo prophetic transformation in the Last Supper.

In addition to the symbolic function of the Twelve, Jesus’ prophetic actions at the Last Supper also involve the manipulation of the everyday symbols of bread and wine, which function to reveal God’s otherwise hidden intentions and to mediate divine power. This is in keeping with the prophetic tradition as described previously. As Hooker points out, both Jeremiah and Jesus interact with “material objects . . . which they ‘identified’ . . . with something else.”²⁴ In the case of the Last Supper, both the actions of Jesus involving the material objects and the individual material objects themselves are central to understanding the hidden intentions which he seeks to convey.²⁵ As noted above, for Jeremiah, a potter’s work in shaping, reshaping, and even smashing a piece of pottery points to God’s hope for and readiness to punish Israel. For Jesus, who also breaks something, the symbolic action functions somewhat differently. As Hooker observes, the symbol of breaking bread differs significantly from the symbol of breaking pottery: “[w]hen you smash a jar into pieces you destroy it, but when you break bread you *share* it.”²⁶ At the Last Supper, the bread, which Jesus identifies with his very self, is broken and shared among the disciples. The sharing of bread points to God’s plan that Jesus’ body be broken and shared for the good of all. The element itself is central to an adequate interpretation of the prophetic action.

The second element, the cup, which is shared without being broken, is also a part of this complex prophetic drama. In both cases, it is the everyday material element which mediates the action and points beyond itself to a matter of more universal significance. As Stacey observes, prophetic actions sometimes involve “everyday, oft-repeated actions that

22. Meier, *A Marginal Jew*, vol. 3: *Companions and Competitors*, 153.

23. See *ibid.*, 152–63.

24. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 48.

25. *Ibid.*

26. *Ibid.*

are deliberately taken over and used as prophetic material.”²⁷ Here the breaking and sharing of bread points not to destruction but to the sharing of new life. The cup, which cannot be divided, but is shared by being passed, functions first as a sign of unity. Stacey notes that in the early Pauline account of the institution narrative, Jesus, rather than directly identifying the wine as his blood, says, “this cup is the new covenant in my blood” (1 Cor 11:25; cf. Luke 22:20). In the prior prophetic tradition, Moses sprinkled blood on the people as a sign of their enhanced holiness as part of entry into covenant with God (Exod 24). Building on this past understanding of the covenant,²⁸ Jesus also points forward to the inbreaking of the kingdom of God, indicating that he will not feast again until “the kingdom of God comes” (Luke 22:18). In the awareness that his life is coming to an end, Jesus takes and shares the cup in a prophetic action which both acknowledges his coming death and conveys that “God will in the end vindicate [God’s] cause and . . . prophet by bringing in his kingdom and seating Jesus at the final banquet to drink the festive wine once again.”²⁹ In sharing this cup with Jesus, the disciples are changed; they both take on the obligation of the new covenant in Jesus’ blood and signal their hope that they, like Jesus, will share in the eschatological feast, symbolized by the cup. This action can be understood in continuity with the previous experiences shared between Jesus and his disciples. The single cup, passed and shared, thus functions first as a sign of unity and covenantal commitment, while simultaneously pointing forward toward the larger significance of the messianic banquet.

The universal significance of Jesus’ actions in the context of the Last Supper is also emphasized by the ritual context of the event. During the celebration of Passover, “Israel looked backwards to the great deliverance of the exodus and forwards to the final deliverance of the messianic age.”³⁰ Stacey adds: “[we] have to interpret the action of Jesus, therefore . . . as dramatizing a work of God that was both past and future, and as

27. Stacey, “The Lord’s Supper as Prophetic Drama,” 69.

28. Hooker, *The Sign of a Prophet*, 53.

29. John P. Meier, *A Marginal Jew: Rethinking the Historical Jesus*, ed. David Noel Freedman, The Anchor Bible Reference Library, vol. 2: *Mentor, Message, and Miracles* (New York: Doubleday, 1994), 308.

30. Stacey, “The Lord’s Supper as Prophetic Drama,” 71.

involving the disciples in a task that had partly been completed, but in part lay ahead of them.”³¹ Here the context of biblical prophecy can assist in parsing the meaning of the symbolic action at the heart of the eucharistic celebration. The meal Jesus shared with his friends functioned in part as a model for Christian sacramental practice. It did so, however, only because it first functioned as a prophetic drama in which the disciples recognized prophetic revelation of universal significance.

In the Last Supper, both a revelatory event and a sacramental model, Jesus seems to look back toward the prophetic tradition and forward toward the needs of the future community. Like other prophets before him, he uses ordinary materials for transformative purposes. The elements of bread and wine are transformed in order to effect transformation in the human beings who engage these elements in the celebration of a ritual meal. From the perspective of biblical prophecy, this transformation may be compared to the transformations effected by Moses’ gesture on the shores of the Red Sea. In the prophetic context, Jesus’ actions, like those of the prophets before him, mediate the divine action which effects change in salvation history.

Looking forward, the prophetic actions of Jesus indicate the presence of what Hooker calls “the divine activity which was at work, creating and bonding a new community.”³² The innovation here is that through their transformation, this new community has also been empowered to continue the presence and actions of Jesus.³³ They have shared and drunk from the one cup, thus indicating their participation in the new covenant and their hope for the coming of the kingdom of God, which has already begun in the life of Jesus. They have shared and eaten the bread which was identified as the body of Christ and, through the experience of prophetic revelation, have been themselves transformed to take on the identity of the body of Christ.³⁴ Using similar language, Nathan Mitchell makes the connection to the sacraments: “[S]acramental language does not ‘describe’ a new community, but *creates* it. . . . While Jesus was at table with his friends the night before he died, the revolutionary ‘language of the future’ overtook his own paschal language, thereby *presenting*

31. Ibid.

32. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 49.

33. Ibid., 50.

34. Ibid., 51.

(not ‘re-presenting’) the meal as something it had never been before—a communion in his body and blood about to be broken for the world’s benefit.”³⁵ This transformation for prophetic action, essentially the making of a prophet or the passing on of the prophetic responsibility which would be continued in the sacraments, is unusual in the biblical prophetic tradition. Hooker argues that the only similar example might be that of the transfer of responsibility from Elijah to Elisha in 2 Kings.³⁶ This transfer, however, was limited to one generation and did not provide for the transfer of prophetic responsibility in perpetuity.

The prophetic actions of Jesus which transform the community of the Twelve thus also provide a mechanism for the continuation of transformative prophetic action in the church (the transformed body of Christ).³⁷ As Johnson points out, the prophetic context of the Last Supper, understood in continuity with the preaching and actions of both Jesus and the prophets who went before him, makes it clear that the transfer of authority for the future should also be understood in this vein. The leadership bestowed “must be in accord with the prophetic reversal of values expressed in the Sermon on the Plain”³⁸ and elsewhere in prophetic action and discourse. This transfer of authority, in the form of servant leadership, lays the foundation for understanding the church not only as a sacrament—as indicated by the Second Vatican Council³⁹—but also as the place of the continuation of Jesus’ prophetic action.

35. Nathan Mitchell, “Sacrament: More Than Meets the Eye,” *Worship* 83, no. 4 (2009): 364.

36. Differences include the fact that Elisha requested it, that he had to do something (see Elijah be taken) in order for it to happen, and that the spirit of Elijah did not remain indefinitely, but only for a single generation.

37. See also David N. Power, “A Prophetic Eucharist in a Prophetic Church,” in *Eucharist: Toward the Third Millennium* (Chicago: Liturgical Training Publications, 2007), 34.

38. Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*, 107.

39. See for example, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 10. Retrieving an image found in the works of Augustine, the Second Vatican Council repeatedly referred to the church as a sacrament. The first instance of this is found in the fifth paragraph of the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, which describes the origins of the “wondrous sacrament of the whole Church” (SC 5) pouring forth from the side of Jesus crucified on the cross. The image is later found in *Lumen Gentium*, the Dogmatic Constitution on the

The Prophetic and Sacramental Church

Without diminishing the uniqueness of the incarnation of the second person of the Trinity in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, it is clear that Jesus' actions and lifestyle were in continuity with those of the previous prophets of Israel. His actions are indicative of the otherwise hidden intentions of God; they sometimes bring immediate salvation or judgment. They have the capacity to transform those who are affected by them. Jesus is also able to initiate or call future generations of prophets to participate in the perpetuation of his own prophetic hopes and actions through the ritual celebration of the sacraments. This call is indicative of an overarching responsibility to take on the prophetic lifestyle of Jesus in which "the person, as much as the spoken word, is the message."⁴⁰ As Johnson points out, the acceptance of this prophetic lifestyle is described very early in the Christian tradition, in the lives of the first Christians depicted in the book of Acts. Just as Jesus can be seen as following in the footsteps of prophetic leaders such as Moses and Elijah and Elisha, so too did the earliest Christians continue to manifest prophetic traits. They are distinctive in their corporate ability to carry on the prophetic tradition of Jesus, particularly in gestures which both reveal and mediate God's presence in history, and in their close association with the Spirit of God. As the centuries progressed, these Christian practices were understood anew in the forms of sacraments that ritualized the prophetic actions of Jesus.

Among the practices of the early Christian community that can be seen as continuations of the work of Jesus (and of the prior prophets) are their healing miracles, which echo those of Jesus, Elijah, and Elisha, as well as their practice of sharing all things in common, which seems to be a deliberate allusion to the vision of God described in the book of Deuteronomy. Jesus' many acts of healing are clearly attested in the New Testament. These actions, which, like Moses' action to part the Red Sea, both indicate and effect salvation, are a part of the prophetic legacy which is carried on in the book of Acts. The many healings in Acts, from Peter's action to heal

Church, which refers to the church as the sacrament of God's saving unity (LG 9). This description carries with it the connotations of transformation and signification which are associated with the seven ritual sacraments.

40. Blenkinsopp, *A History of Prophecy in Israel*, 146.

the lame man in Acts 3 to his raising the widow Tabitha (Acts 9:36-42), to Paul's healings and exorcisms later in Acts, all echo Jesus' actions and the actions of prophetic leaders such as Elijah, who restored the widow's son to life (1 Kgs 17:17-24), and Elisha, who saved another widow and her sons from slavery and debt (2 Kgs 4). In all of these cases, and in the case of Moses' gesture to part the Red Sea (Exod 15:6), God's presence is both signified and effected. God's intentions for the sick, poor, and widowed are made clear, and those who are the objects of the prophet's actions experience salvation from their immediate difficulties and function as both the signs and the effects of God's intentions in the world.

In yet another instance of a symbolic action that both reveals and mediates God's presence in history, the book of Acts describes the earliest Christians as dedicated to sharing all things in common and giving freely to those who were in need (Acts 2:45). As Johnson points out, this action alludes to a passage in the Book of Deuteronomy which describes the vision of God in which "since the LORD, your God, will bless you abundantly in the land the LORD, your God, will give you to possess as a heritage, there shall be no one of you in need" (Deut 15:4).⁴¹ In the visual and literary embodiment of this vision in the community life of the church, the earliest Christians both reveal God's otherwise unseen intentions for humanity and mediate the presence of God to those who would otherwise have lacked basic necessities. As a community, they act in a manner which is consistent with the symbolic revelations of the Old Testament prophets as well as with the preaching and prophetic manner of life displayed by Jesus.

As was the case with prophets before them, the prophetic actions of these early Christians are both initiated and sustained by the Spirit of God. Just as Elisha received a "double portion" of the Spirit (2 Kgs 2:9-11), and Jesus received the Spirit in his baptism in the Jordan, so the church receives the Spirit at Pentecost. As Johnson points out, the prophetic trajectory is clear from the disciples' own experience of the Spirit of God that enables them to speak in different languages (Acts 2:4), to Peter's preaching on a passage in which the prophet Joel speaks of a time when God will "pour out a portion of [God's] Spirit on all flesh" (Acts 2:17), to the mention of the prophetic "signs and wonders" (Acts 2:22) performed

41. See Johnson, *Prophetic Jesus, Prophetic Church*, 111-13.

by Jesus.⁴² Peter's interpretation of these experiences can be seen to establish the church's position in Israel's prophetic history. The prophetic tradition continued to evolve in early Christianity in the establishment of ritual baptism as an experience of what Hooker calls "divine activity . . . at work creating and bonding a new community."⁴³ This becomes clear when those present respond to Peter's invitation to "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins; and you will receive the gift of the holy Spirit" (Acts 2:38), and as the early communities continued the ritual celebration of the Last Supper. In these ritual practices, the early church continued the manipulation of everyday symbols that functioned both to reveal God's otherwise unseen intentions and to mediate divine power.⁴⁴ These actions, as was the case at the Last Supper, function in the context of the church to "create and bond a new community."⁴⁵ The sacramental evolution of these ideas becomes clear in the fifth-century preaching of Augustine, who famously told his *infantes*, "You are beginning to receive what you have also begun to be."⁴⁶ He was referring of course to the body of Christ, which, as we have seen, is the risen body of a prophet. If the origins of the Eucharist lie in the realm of prophetic drama and the transfer of prophetic responsibility, then Christians, at least by the time of Augustine, recognized themselves as called to prophetic transformation as often as they participate in the liturgy.

As was the case with the prophets before them, this transformation is never for personal fulfillment, but rather for God's purposes in the world. As Stacey puts it, "we must believe that our Lord was not simply enabling Peter and Andrew and James and John to get themselves sorted out in the upper room."⁴⁷ The perspective of prophetic action demands that those who celebrate the Christian sacraments see themselves as heirs

42. *Ibid.*, 62.

43. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 49.

44. Hooker, *The Signs of a Prophet*, 3.

45. *Ibid.*, 49.

46. Augustine, "Sermon 228B," in *Sermons on the Liturgical Seasons*, ed. John E. Rotelle, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century* (New Rochelle, NY: New City Press, 1993), 4.

47. Stacey, "The Lord's Supper as Prophetic Drama," 73.

responsible for the continuation of the prophetic lifestyle of Jesus lived in the Holy Spirit.⁴⁸ This of course has ethical implications beyond the strictly liturgical setting—as can be seen in the lives of people like Oscar Romero and Dorothy Day who have integrated word and symbolic action to live the call to Christian prophetic lifestyle.

Conclusion: The Table of Prophetic Action

For most Catholics, encounter with biblical prophecy comes primarily in the modern-day liturgical context of the first reading. Removed from their original cultural and textual contexts, however, these short passages are often mystifying, and certainly quite foreign to the cultural context of the twenty-first century. It is rarely immediately clear that they are part of the same table as the body of Christ. Nonetheless, the lens of prophetic action, broadly understood, can offer a helpful perspective on twenty-first-century liturgical celebration. It can lead to a deeper understanding of the word of God, the sacraments, and the unified “table of the word of God and the Body of Christ” (DV 21), from which the Bread of Life is offered to the faithful.

As Thomas Aquinas points out in his discussion of the sacraments in the Third Part of the *Summa Theologiae*, God allows human beings “to achieve an awareness of things which they do not know through things which they do know.”⁴⁹ The earliest followers of Jesus had no knowledge of the doctrine of the incarnation of the Second Person of the Trinity. The salvific and transformative actions of God in the prophets, however, were well known to them. They likewise knew from their tradition that all prophecy is a result of divine action and human bodily mediation. Recognizing Jesus as a prophet, they began to understand him, and perhaps eventually themselves, as part of the body of Christ. In the

48. David Power argues that “[h]eard at a sacramental celebration, the prophecies invite a remembrance of the counterstories . . . from this there may spring a lamentation, which calls for an entering into the Christ story and the Christ event within a new horizon of conversion.” David N. Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (New York: Crossroad 1999), 364.

49. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* (New York: Blackfriars and McGraw-Hill, 1963), III, q. 60, a. 2.

modern-day liturgical context, it may be argued that believers have the opposite experience. Far removed from biblical prophecy, modern believers understand—at least in general terms—that Jesus is God Incarnate and is present to them in the eucharistic celebration. This, however, does not help to explain the first reading on the Fourth Tuesday of Lent, in Year A, in which Ezekiel’s process of wading through water of varying depths is described in great detail (Ezek 47:1-9; 12). When the modern believer begins with an understanding of Jesus’ actions as prophetic, it can make it possible to relate to the prophets who went before him. This perspective can in turn highlight the significance of the divine will at work in other prophets, thus offering the possibility for liturgical continuity between the familiar actions of Jesus and the less familiar, and sometimes bewilderingly foreign, actions of his prophetic predecessors.

The lens of biblical prophecy can also help modern-day Christians to recognize that prophecy is not exclusively the “word” of God any more than sacraments are exclusively the “symbols” which effect transformation. Both prophecy and sacrament rely on words, symbols, and actions for the purposes of facilitating the divine-human encounter in history. An understanding of prophecy emphasizes the enduring importance of the human body and human experience for the mediation of divine revelation in salvation history. The creative, transforming word of God is rarely a disembodied word. This is most clearly seen in the incarnation, but it also is seen in the words, symbols, and actions of the biblical prophets, in the preaching of Jesus and the disciples, and in the sacramental celebrations of Christians today. It is not possible to relegate “word” to one end of the liturgical table and “symbol” to the other. Word and symbol combined in both prophetic and sacramental actions are the building blocks of biblical prophecy and of Christian sacramental celebration. The liturgical proclamation of biblical prophecy thus has the potential to function as a stark reminder of the mediation of the word of God in human language, symbols, and experience.

Finally, the prophetic perspective deals directly with an understanding of the inherent unity of the “bread of life [which is] offere[d] to the faithful from the one table of the word of God and the Body of Christ” (DV 21). While Christians do not always think of themselves as prophetic, one can argue that as a church, they are called to both prophetic and to sacramental witness in the world. The actions of which they are capable can and should reveal and mediate God’s presence in the world. This

capacity and vocation is grounded in the ritual experiences of the sacraments. In the ritual expression of Jesus' prophetic actions, particularly in baptism and Eucharist, Christians both reveal and mediate the presence of God and are bonded into a new community, called to prophetic witness and action in the world. In this context the prophetic elements of the Liturgy of the Word can be understood as a transformative model of the life which the Liturgy of the Eucharist makes possible in history. Far from separate entities, the liturgical experience as a whole has the capacity to nurture the faithful for prophetic witness through the Spirit of God present in word and sacrament.