

“With a foundational premise that ‘the church is a historical people and not an abstraction . . . in which sin and sanctity coexist,’ Flanagan explores the tension of the church’s holiness and sinfulness. With care and clarity, he unpicks the threads of this tension and leads the reader to a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the church. A solid contribution to an important debate as the historical community of the Catholic Church publicly struggles with its own failings.”

—Neil Ormerod
Australian Catholic University

“Brian Flanagan’s new book takes up the extraordinarily challenging but absolutely essential question, ‘What does it mean for the church to be both holy and sinful?’ Most Christians would readily admit this as their lived experience, but might have a harder time articulating this reality theologically. *Stumbling in Holiness* shows us, in a clear and inviting way, how the framework and language to understand this reality can be found within our theological traditions, and how the holy and sinful church is nothing new, but reaches as far back as the time of Peter and Paul.”

—James Martin, SJ
Author of *Jesus: A Pilgrimage* and *In All Seasons, For All Reasons*

“There are plenty of books on holiness and more than a few on sin. Brian Flanagan has achieved the rare distinction of balancing a conversation about the relationship between sin and holiness that plays down neither. Recognizing the essential connections between sin and holiness in the life of any believing Christian, he tackles the much thornier question of how the two play roles in the Church itself. And he succeeds delightfully. We all may stumble in holiness, but his treatment of the topic is as sure-footed as could be.”

—Paul Lakeland
Fairfield University

“With a graceful style and a gritty realism Brian Flanagan wrestles with one of the most deeply felt theological issues over the last century. How can the Christian church pray, think, and act in such a way that honestly acknowledges and confesses the tragic consequences of our collective sinfulness, while clinging onto the healing power of God’s grace among us as a source of courage and hope. Flanagan’s special flair is his subtle analysis of crucial intergenerational theological disputes in a way that invites a wider audience to perceive what is at stake in a doctrine under development and a community stumbling in holiness.”

—Bradford Hinze
Fordham University

"Sinfulness in the Church is a topic that by its very nature makes some believers and leaders quake. Yet Brian Flanagan skillfully demonstrates how sin and sanctity, mistake and forgiveness are all fundamental elements of the spiritual and incarnated journey in faith for individual and institution. Both believer and community of believers can only slouch toward Bethlehem waiting to be reborn. Flanagan's particular contribution is to cut through the false dichotomy—a firewall for fallibility—that the church's sons and daughters can stumble without the church's own sanctity being compromised.

"This book should be read and taught by ecclesialogists, parish ministers, church historians, and liturgists."

—Christopher M. Bellitto
Professor of History
Kean University

"Through a highly readable and engaging account of the many failings of the church in its historic and recent dark nights, Flanagan's central argument is an overwhelmingly positive and hope-filled one: that in acknowledging the church's own sinfulness we also come to realize that it, and we, within it, are always engaged in a pilgrim journey along the way toward holiness. In these engaging chapters, you will find thought-provoking and inspiring treatments of the liturgy, key theological concepts pertaining to sin and holiness alike, treatments of the church's failings—especially ecclesial sin and the debates surrounding the evasion of owning such failings on the part of church authorities—and, finally, that hope-filled conclusion: yes, the church is human and will stumble along the way, but Flanagan holds that there is nothing in the slightest way contradictory to say, as Pope Francis has also frequently acknowledged, that the church is holy and yet sinful at one and the same time. What the author terms 'the thoroughly human people of God' are also, at one and the same time 'God's holy assembly,' gathered and charged with making present the holiness of God in this world. This important addition to the growing literature on ecclesial sin and repentance will challenge, provoke, and inspire in equal measure."

—Gerard Mannion
Amaturo Professor in Catholic Studies
Georgetown University

Brian P. Flanagan

Stumbling in Holiness

Sin and Sanctity in the Church



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Acknowledgments

At the beginning of his book *Holiness*, Donald Nicholl writes, “The very act of trying to write about holiness is itself a search for holiness. It is not as though you first achieve holiness and afterwards describe it, but rather that in trying to write about it the very process of writing serves as a kind of geiger counter which discloses holiness to you.”¹ My attempts to write about the holiness of the church, as well as about its failings, have been undertaken in a similar spirit of exploration. As the chapters that follow suggest, while I think holiness is always personal, it’s never individual—growth in love of God and of neighbor is always a journey with companions, and so it is with great joy that I can thank some of the communities and individuals who have helped me along the way to the completion of this manuscript.

I first would like to thank some of the institutions whose funding and hospitality allowed me to pursue this project. I was first able to develop the proposal for what became this book at a summer writing workshop at the Collegetown Institute at Saint John’s University in Minnesota. My home institution, Marymount University, provided faculty development grants and a sabbatical research grant that allowed me to complete this manuscript. The librarians at Marymount and at the wider Washington Research Library Consortium always helped me obtain the materials I needed, and were regularly merciful with regard to my late fees. My dean and other administrators were also consistently generous in providing the encouragement and support needed to develop the ideas presented in this text. Theologians, especially those connected with the College Theology Society and the Ecclesiological Investigations Network, have been invaluable conversation partners over the years. Scott MacDougall (BTFF!) graciously read the entire manuscript, helping to lower the incidence of any of my own errors that may remain.

1. Donald Nicholl, *Holiness* (New York: Paulist Press, 1987), 4.

At Marymount, my students provide a daily confirmation of my vocation as a teaching theologian, with their questions, their enthusiasm, their challenges, and their honesty. Whether in meetings or around the lunch table, my faculty and staff colleagues make Marymount a community and not only a workplace. In the Department of Theology and Religious Studies, Brian, Jacquelyn, Kathleen, and Matt have kept me sane, kept me smiling, and kept me hopeful about the future of Catholic higher education.

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Theology is not just done with one's formal faith community, but with wider groups of friends and family who help you to relax, who prod you to more careful thought, and who put up with you when you slip into lecturing professor mode. My fellow musicians in the Monumental City Ancient Fife and Drum Corps have provided a welcome respite from thinking and writing over the years. I could not be who I am today as a theologian or, more importantly, a person, without my family, my parents Bill and Peg, my brother Dave, his wife Gabi, and my godson Fritz. More friends than I could name or count provide the "cloud of witnesses" that cheered this book and its author on along the way. Dan, Julie, Laura, Morgan, Norah, Peter and Janine, Ryan, and Stephen are just some of those whose love and care for me I deeply appreciate.

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Introduction

“Lord, I am not worthy / that you should enter under my roof, / but only say the word, / and my soul shall be healed.”¹

This text from the Order of Mass is prayed at Mass in every Latin Rite Roman Catholic Church. And, more than just the texts, the actions of every Eucharist pulse with the systole and diastole of the joy of being made holy in Christ and of the sorrow of our failures to live in the light of our baptism. This is echoed in our liturgical year, in Lenten fasting and Easter feasting, in Advent’s absence and Christmas’s presence. And it echoes in the life of the church in these last days, in its past two millennia of pilgrimage along the way opened by Christ toward the fullness of the reign of God.

The creeds of the church invoke faith in the church as “holy.” Ecclesial holiness is one of the earliest claims made in any creedal statements about the church. The “Roman Symbol” of the second century refers simply to belief in “the holy church.” And even adding “catholic” or “apostolic” seems to have begun more as a way of *identifying* a particular community (i.e., the broad “catholic” church as opposed to a smaller or more localized church) rather than as predicating a particular *quality* of the church. Given that history, Paul O’Callaghan argues that the statement of the Apostles’ Creed “*Credo . . . sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam*” is best translated as “I believe that the Catholic Church is holy,” in which case ecclesial holiness is one of the most basic creedal statements about the church.²

This is, to put it mildly, a fairly audacious claim. Audacious when it was made in the baptismal promises of the second and third centuries, in a community already scarred by betrayals under persecution,

1. Quotations of *The Roman Missal* are taken from the English Translation According to the Third Typical Edition (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011).

2. Paul O’Callaghan, “The Holiness of the Church in Early Christian Creeds,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54 (1988): 59–60.

schism, and the usual day-to-day failures of a pilgrim church. Audacious when made in the twenty-first century in churches marked by the hardened scars and more recent wounds of two millennia of Christian history. Audacious in the context of North American Roman Catholicism, marked by profound ecclesial failure in such recent errors as the sexual abuse of minors and participation in structures of systematic racism. Audacious when made at each baptism and each recitation of the creed in communities regularly, depressingly, aware of their distance from God and weighed down by the effects of human sin. And yet, this assertion of the church's holiness is one of the first claims Christians made about their fragile gathered assembly, even before claims for its unity, apostolicity, or catholicity.

This book asks how we as Christians, and particularly Christians in the Roman Catholic Church, can begin to think and talk rightly about the sanctity and sinfulness of the church. We bring to this topic our own difficult and contradictory experiences of the church. Some of these will be unique to my own biography and yours as a reader. Some of those experiences are entirely positive and life-giving—for many, including myself, the church continues to be a place of encounter with God through the Word and the Holy Spirit, to be a place of grace where the “peace the world cannot give” is made present, to be a reconciling and healing sacrament of the promised reign of God. To call a created reality “holy” is to ascribe to it a certain closeness to God, a transparency of encounter with God's glory in and through encounter with the created reality, a saturation of the reality with the presence of God's Spirit that confers a kind of borrowed divinity upon it. Through the preaching of the Gospel, the celebration of the sacraments, and the formation of the moral life, the Christian church is a uniquely constituted holy community of encounter with God. “Holiness is the most attractive face of the Church,” writes Pope Francis in *Gaudete et Exsultate* (9), his apostolic exhortation *On the Call to Holiness in Today's World*, released just as I was finishing this book.

And yet, encounter with the church has been for many of us an encounter with an absence of holiness. Without unhelpful generalizing about some major ecclesial mistakes of the past (e.g., the usual trio of the Crusades, the Inquisition, and the Holocaust), I can still point to some of the communities that I am a part of that, within recent memory, have seemed to fail in their mission to be holy pres-

ences of the reign of God. I am thinking here of the Roman Catholic churches of the East Coast of the United States with which I am most familiar, and in many other parts of the nation and world, struggling under the weight of sexual misconduct by clergy and the criminally negligent handling of that conduct by presbyters and bishops. We can raise up experiences of past and present ecclesial complicity in structures of racism, sexism, and heterosexism, both within the churches of the United States and in the wider cultural context. We must face honestly the fact that the Christian churches scandalously remain divided from each other in direct contradiction to Christ's will "that they be one," with a complacency and a lack of "holy impatience" for full and visible communion between our churches. You and I can point to our own painful personal examples of bishops and laypeople, presbyters and whole parishes, teachers and theologians failing as disciples of Christ, and doing so not simply as atomized individuals, but as church.

This is not a new phenomenon, as the stories of Peter and of Judas in the biblical passion narratives provide painful witness. And, given the history of human failure in the church, it is not a new subject of reflection in theology. And yet, there may be something newly important and urgent compelling us to speak about ecclesial holiness and sinfulness now, in 2018, with new attention and depth. For some, that urgency comes from some of the deep wounds of recent years in the U.S. Roman Catholic Church. For some, this comes from new awareness or attention to the ecclesial mistakes of the past, whether through an embarrassed sense of past moral complicity or through being on the receiving end of past Christian faults used as a cudgel by the proponents of a "new atheism." For some, it comes from a cultural embrace of authenticity, in public figures and private choices, as a foundational good. And for all of us within the church, it might come through awareness that in as much as "we are the church," we are more or less aware of our own monotonous rhythms of grace and sin, our confused, perplexing personal pilgrimage toward God.

The central conviction of this book is that we are called to hold together at the same time two truths about the Christian church. First, that the church is holy, God's chosen instrument for the salvation of the world. From its foundation in the paschal mystery of its head, Jesus Christ, and the continuing, empowering indwelling of the Holy

Spirit, the church is how God is healing and elevating human social life, forming us into the kind of people that God has always dreamed we will be. Second, that church is sinful, in that as it walks its pilgrimage toward its fulfillment in the reign of God, it stumbles, sometimes spectacularly so. While God has promised that the gates of hell would not prevail against the church, in the mystery of God's plan the church, as a free human community moving through history, regularly stumbles and fails to live up to its calling.

To say that the church is holy *and* sinful is not contradictory. And yet holding these two truths together in tension is difficult. As members of the church, as leaders in the church, and as theologians, we often try to resolve that tension by opting for only one side of the equation or dividing the holy church from the sinful church, or the holy church from its sinful members. Sometimes we talk as though the church were only the holy church, that our pilgrimage had already ended and that the church were already spotless and free from stain or wrinkle. The actual experiences of error or failure are dismissed as not being "really" the church's errors or failures, and the holy church is disconnected from the more ambiguous, messy experience of the actual historical communities we are. On the other hand, sometimes, especially in the face of particularly stark reminders of our community's fallibility, we despair of the church being anything more than another flawed and failing human institution; we find it difficult to see the working of God's grace in and through such an all-too-human reality, and instead of seeing the church being led by the Holy Spirit on pilgrimage toward its final fulfillment, we seem to be wandering without destination in the desert. We might then reduce our understanding of the holy church as an entirely future event, rather than its reality here and now in history.

This book, therefore, is an attempt to work through the categories that allow us to believe in a holy yet sinful church. We are a church that stumbles in holiness. Both are part of our belief and experience, and holding both aspects of the church's reality together is part of the challenge of speaking the truth about the mystery of the church.

The first chapter, "Sin and Sanctity in the Liturgy," points to the primary source of the church's understanding of itself as holy and sinful, its liturgy. The ordinary liturgy of Christians, and in particular the assembly of the church for the Eucharist, expresses the church's

understanding of its holiness and sinfulness better than works of systematic theology such as this one. In chapter 1, I present a liturgical theological reflection on that expression, highlighting how in its words, actions, gestures, and movement the liturgy holds together the church's belief in its holiness and its awareness of its limitations and sinfulness.

In chapter 2, "Sanctity, Sin, and Church," I present some working definitions of three of the major concepts that come together in the question of ecclesial sin and sanctity—holiness, sinfulness, and church. While not full theological treatments of each concept, this chapter provides shared vocabulary for the later chapters, and highlights some of the aspects of these concepts that will be particularly crucial for the later chapters' explorations of how these terms fit together.

Chapter 3, "I Believe in the Holy Church," outlines a theology of the holiness of the church. First, it looks at the classical treatments of the "formal holiness" of the church; that is, the way its sanctity is given and empowered by God in its origins, in its institutions like the sacraments, scriptures, and ministry, and in the destiny that God is always drawing it toward. Then, it looks at the way in which that sanctity is not only abstract or formal, but occurs and re-occurs in the life of the church, both in the individual lives of the saints, both known and unknown to us, and in the lives of saintly communities, local churches and particular Christian assemblies that show forth the reality of God's holiness in their lives and witness.

Chapter 4 is entitled "Have Mercy on Us, Lord, for We Have Sinned." This verse from Psalm 51 begins my treatment of limitation and sin in the life of the church. After explaining why discussion of ecclesial sin is necessary, despite the difficulty and even shame of admitting the shortcomings of our community, I look at four ways in which we can identify the holy church of God as also sinful: in the fact that individual sinners like ourselves are and remain members of the church; in the sins and errors committed by leaders of the church in the name of the church; in social sin in the church, the residue of personal sins that can lead to continuing injustice or bias within the church; and in cases where churches can be seen to sin together, as a form of shared action. While the final indefectibility of the church is never in question, this chapter explores the way in which we as pilgrim church stumble along our way.

In chapter 5, “Avoiding the Paradox of the Holy and Sinful Church,” I review some of the most common ways theologians have attempted to understand the coincidence of ecclesial sin and holiness. In particular, I criticize the most common theological explanation, one in which “the church is sinless, but its members sin,” as inadequate to the mystery of the holy and sinful church. This formula, in its attempt to explain away the fact that sanctity and sin reside in the same community of people, leads to a serious ecclesiological error, that of positing a church different and detached from the actual concrete community of women and men living their Christian lives throughout history.

Finally, in chapter 6, “Naming the Holy and Sinful Church,” we return to where we started, in the paradox of ecclesial sin and sanctity, but hopefully having learned something about what we as Christians intend and believe by those concepts. I offer five guidelines for further thought and practice with regard to our holy and sinful church for use by theologians but also by pastors, preachers, ministers, and the body of the church as a whole in our attempts to understand ourselves. My hope is that through the use of these guidelines, we might return to our liturgical prayer and to our lives as church with a better understanding of what we are saying when we profess our belief that we, the complicated, stumbling, thoroughly human people of God, are also somehow God’s holy assembly, gathered together to make God’s holiness present in the world.

Three caveats for the reader are in order before we begin, and all reflect the need to consider this book as the starting point of a conversation, rather than its ending point, if my hopes in writing it are to come to fruition. First, this book reflects its author in ways that I recognize and ways that are yet opaque to me. I am a primarily English-speaking Roman Catholic white male theologian living and working in academia in the United States in the early twenty-first century. All of these things explain, without necessarily excusing, the blind spots, biases, and choices that I have made in the way that I address these topics. My hope is that, in starting such a conversation despite these limitations, and in inviting you, the reader, and my wider Christian community into thought on these topics, any of my own stumbling in the thinking and writing of this text can be put right through the thought and voices of my fellow pilgrims.

Second, more specifically in relation to the wider ecumenical import of this text, is the fact that this is primarily a work of Roman Catholic Christian theology and written by and in large part for a Roman Catholic Christian audience. It relies in large part upon Roman Catholic theological sources and depends, likely in ways beyond my awareness, upon Roman Catholic Christian assumptions. My hope is that what I have written about the church will not be limited to my fellow Roman Catholics, and that despite such limitations it will be a help for other Christians in thinking through what the church is or should be in their own contexts and communities. It is no coincidence that some of the clearest Catholic teaching at the Second Vatican Council and in the subsequent decades on the need for the church to repent for its past errors has been with regard to the division of the one church of Christ; my hope in that nudging my own Roman Catholic community to address the fact of ecclesial failure more forthrightly will, in the long run, allow us to work and pray more fervently for the full visible unity that God desires for the church.

Third, and finally, this book remains at a relatively abstract theoretical level; like a plane flying thirty thousand feet above the ground, it is able to point to many of the major lines on the ground, the most significant details of the topography and the overall landscape of the church. All of my hopes for this book will remain unfulfilled if it does not help evoke, in the reader and in our future ecclesial conversations, further attention to the as-important details on the ground. The narratives of ecclesial sin and sanctity, the stories of holy women, men, and communities, and the dangerous memories of our stumbling churches through time are the unspoken but necessary complement to this more theoretical approach. Continuing to explore the dynamic relation between how we tell the story of the church in systematic theology, on one hand, and in the primary theologies of the liturgy and our lives, on the other, is my hope for the future use of this text. In no way should my characterization of this theoretical work as systematic, therefore, imply that I understand it as a closed or completed system; rather than closing the book on the question of ecclesial sin and sanctity, my understanding is that this text, in a small but hopefully helpful way, instead will help us to talk further as we walk along the road with our God.

CHAPTER 1

Sin and Sanctity in the Liturgy

Each Sunday morning, I walk into my local parish for the Eucharist. I bow to Christ symbolized in the altar, take my seat, perhaps kneel in prayer, and then stand with the gathered assembly as the Mass begins. I walk in with my usual distractions, my frustrations with other drivers on the way to church or with myself for running late out of the door yet again, my hopes for a moment of peace, for a word of insight, or even for an encounter with the triune God. Joined together with familiar faces, visiting tourists to the District of Columbia, families with squirming children and older parishioners whose ginger movements evidence the low-level pain running through their joints, we gather, listen, share a meal, and are sent out to the world in mission, as Christians have done for centuries. Despite the “normality” of these actions—particularly for those, like my ancestors, shaped in the heyday of immersive U.S. European immigrant subcultures—I and the congregants who worship alongside me are engaging in a subversive activity with a scandalous claim: that in our act of gathering, we make Christ present in the world through the act of assembling. In the post-Christian world of the early twenty-first century, the strangeness of postponing brunch to go to Mass is becoming more evident as a cultural marker. The stranger claim by far, however, is that in the flawed, gifted, limited, sinful, and yet often profoundly holy body of Christians that constitutes any given parish or any given assembly for the liturgy, one encounters the presence of Christ through, and not despite of, this concrete company of believers, a group of survivors in the same lifeboat turned into a boatload of pilgrims rowing in the same general direction.

The fourfold presence of Christ in the eucharistic assembly taught by the Second Vatican Council in their Constitution on the Sacred

Liturgy¹ can best be felt in my parish by their use of incense. In addition to the main altar of the church, which functions as a unifying symbol for all four forms of Christ's presence, the Book of the Gospels, the elements of bread and wine, the person of the presiding minister, and the assembly as a whole are all incensed during the Mass as an act of veneration of Christ present through these meditations.² We Roman Catholics traditionally have treasured the real presence of Christ in the bread and wine, which become for us Christ's Body and Blood; many of our Protestant sisters and brothers have a similarly rich tradition of appreciation for the real presence of Christ in the word of God heard in Scripture and in preaching. And, although not without disagreement, many Christians value the way in which our preachers and presiders act "in persona Christi"—that is, in their words and actions are able to speak and act in continuity with the ministry of Jesus of Nazareth.

It is that fourth form of presence, the presence of Christ in the gathered assembly, that perhaps most gives us pause, and for reasons quite relevant to the arguments of this book. As Bruce Morrill writes, "The scandal of the cross has passed over into the scandal of the church, that is, into the stupefying claim that in such ordinary, limited, and sinful people as ourselves God is revealing God's unbounded love, mercy, and forgiveness for the world."³ There are at least two pitfalls to be avoided in beginning any reflection upon the holiness and sinfulness of the church. The first is the error of equating "the church" with "the leaders of the church" or, in the case of the Roman Catholic Church, with "the bishops" or "the pope." This can be due to unconscious habit, as in newscasts in which "the church did X today" really means that the bishop of a local diocese did X; this can more problematically be due to an erroneous theology of the church

1. Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*), 7. All quotations from the documents of the council will be from Austin Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations; The Basic Sixteen Documents* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2014).

2. See also Bruce Morrill's reflections upon the use of incense to venerate the presence of Christ in the deceased in the Rite for Funerals, *Divine Worship and Human Healing* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009).

3. Bruce Morrill, *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist* (New York: Paulist, 2012), 13.

in which priests, bishops, or the pope are thought of as more “really” the church than the lay faithful, their sisters and brothers in Christ. In either case, limiting a discussion of the holiness of the church to a discussion of its leaders is an error, as I will discuss below. The second pitfall, and one with greater theological complexity, would be that of beginning with more abstract theological reflection upon “the church” as an entity; as I will discuss in chapter 5, many errors in ecclesiological reflection on the church’s holiness stem from a mistaken hypostatization and dehistoricization of the church—that is, a mistaken overemphasis upon the church as a “she” or an “it” distinct from the “we” who actually compose the church and distinct from the concrete historical reality in which we, the church, are participants. As a matter of theology, this will require the more extensive argument to follow. As a matter of methodological procedure, however, I judge that beginning at the ground level of the church, so to speak, rather than the higher altitudes of ecclesiological doctrine, may help ground the author’s and the reader’s reflections together in the messy presence of Christ in the fallible gathered assemblies to which we belong, rather than in a tempting, but perhaps illusory, entity called the church. In the words of Neil Ormerod, such theologies “provide often inspiring but idealized models of church life based on profound notions of *communio*, *perichoresis*, *mysterium*, and *diakonia*. They describe a church that we would all want to belong to. But when we look at the church as an historical concrete reality we may wonder about the discrepancy between the idealized form and the historical facts.”⁴

Of the possible methods by which scholars can study the concrete assembly of the church—sociological, ethnographic, narrative—in this first chapter I am using the methods of liturgical theology here as the major starting point for the explorations of this book. Broadly, liturgical theology is a method that begins from the sacramental and liturgical praxis of the Christian church as a privileged expression of the church’s faith. Among other theorists, in his classic work *On Liturgical Theology*, Aidan Kavanagh argues that the liturgy of the church is its “*prima theologia*,” its “prime” or “first” theology, as

4. Neil M. Ormerod, “The Structure of a Systematic Ecclesiology,” *Theological Studies* 62 (2002): 5.

distinct from the important yet secondary theology found in academic discourse, systematic theology, and books such as this. Liturgical theology is distinct from theology *about* the liturgy, therefore, in that it understands itself less as speaking about the liturgy and more attending to what the liturgy “speaks” about God and about all things as related to God. Such a perspective is often summarized by the Latin tag *lex orandi, lex credendi*, that is, “the law of prayer is the law of belief.” Nevertheless, as Kavanagh documents, in the original texts, the law of prayer is not simply related to belief, but provides the foundation for belief: “This stress is summed up in the patristic maxim *legem credendi, lex statuat supplicandi*, a subtle formulation in which the predicate is all important. For the predicate *statuat* does not permit these two fundamental laws of belief and worship in Christian life to float apart or to be opposed to each other, as in the ‘tag’ form *lex orandi, lex credendi*. The verb *statuat* articulates the standard of believing and the standard of worshipping within the faithful assembly.”⁵ In the perspective of Kavanagh and other liturgical theologians, the liturgy is not just one source among many, but a primary “text,” comparable to the Scriptures and to other forms of the tradition of the church in its ability to reveal who God is and, for the purposes of this project, who we are in relation to God.

A liturgical theological method is well suited for my investigation for a number of reasons. Most practically, many of the readers of this text will have experience of Christian worship in some form and can evaluate my own necessarily particular observations and judgments in relation to their own experiences. Even if the readers’ experience is significantly different, from either a difference of rite or of Christian denomination, or from the grace-full diversity of a church that gathers “people of every race, language, and way of life,”⁶ my hope is that they will be able to perceive the common structures of Christian prayer that shape our theology.

A second argument comes from the singular relevance of liturgical theology to ecclesiology; as the assembly, the *ecclesia*, the Christian

5. Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1984), 91.

6. Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation II, in the 1973 ICEL Translation of the Roman Missal.

church is most itself in its worship, and so can be expected to there express who it is in relation to God in a determinative way. As Gordon Lathrop writes, “From the viewpoint of liturgical theology, the most basic and constitutive sense of the word ‘church’ refers to the communal gathering around washing, texts, and meal, as these are interpreted as having to do with Jesus Christ.”⁷ Kavanagh identifies the liturgy as “an enacted ecclesiology”⁸ and asserts that “the liturgy is not some thing separate from the church, but simply the church 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 that faith.”⁹ This is not to say that the liturgy is infallible, nor that our worship is somehow free from the same dynamics of sin and sanctity to be addressed throughout this book; nor should we succumb to the temptation of a “sacramental optimism” that assumes that the liturgy mechanically or magically produces perfect Christians or Christian communities.¹⁰ But if it is true that “a Christian church does not merely use a liturgy [but] is the liturgy by which it worships,”¹¹ then it makes sense to begin with an analysis of how the church performs its relation to the Holy One and to its own holiness and sinfulness through the dynamics of the liturgy. In doing this, I am putting off the more traditional theological procedure of clearly defining terms like “church,” “holiness,” and “sinfulness” to the next chapter, with the expectation that this exploration of liturgical theology will better ground those definitions than attention to Scripture or past theological reflection alone.

One final preliminary question must be addressed—which liturgy, and whose liturgy? If the object of the investigation is the phenomena of ecclesial holiness and ecclesial sinfulness, then liturgies that explicitly address ecclesial acts of repentance might be an obvious place to begin. For example, Pope John Paul II’s “Day of Pardon” service on March 12, 2000, in which he asked pardon from the Lord “for the past

7. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things: A Liturgical Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 9.

8. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 67.

9. Kavanagh, 75.

10. The phrase “sacramental optimism” comes from Marcus Mescher, “Liturgy as Power-Sharing: Synergy for Synodality,” in *Liturgy + Power*, ed. Brian P. Flanagan and Johann M. Vento (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2017), 49–50.

11. Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology*, 97.

and present sins of the sons and daughters of the church,"¹² or, more recently, liturgies of repentance for clergy sexual abuse, express explicitly a particular understanding of ecclesial sin and holiness. But before analyzing such "extraordinary" liturgies of ecclesial repentance, I would like to begin with what for many Christians is the "ordinary" liturgy of the average Sunday Eucharist with which I began this chapter. A similar and perhaps equally rich liturgical theology could be drawn from other forms of Christian liturgy, especially the rite of baptism. And yet due to the regularity of the celebration of Eucharist as part of the "normal" rhythm of ecclesial life in many churches, by contrast to the more occasional celebration of baptism and other forms of Christian prayer, this liturgy provides the most accessible, fruitful source for understanding the church. And while I will be speaking mostly from within the particularities of my own primarily English-language, primarily Latin Catholic experiences, I hope to draw out some of the parallel expressions that one finds in other forms of Christian Sunday worship. In doing so, one finds in the ordinary of any particular Sunday a profound enactment of three components of a theology of ecclesial sin and sanctity: a regular *drawing near to the Holy One*, whose very being provides a definition of the holy; a *pausing* or *retreating* from that presence, grounded in awareness of our creatureliness and limitations, on one hand, and of our sinfulness, on the other; and finally a real *participation* in God's own holiness according to our possibilities as humans, which encompasses our limitations and sin within the wider context of God's grace. This movement, which might be compared to a dance—and particularly a "two-steps-forward-one-step-back" movement that acknowledges our limitation while still being powerfully drawn into participation into the life of God—is a defining rhythm of the liturgy and a profound expression of the paradoxical relation of holiness and sin in the body of the church.

Sin and Sanctity in the Ordinary Liturgy

One possible, but in the end too simplistic, approach to understanding ecclesial holiness in and through the liturgy would be to

12. See www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/events_day_pardon_en.htm.

look only or primarily for the words “sinful” or “holy” in the texts of the prayers and other portions of the Eucharist.¹³ Not surprisingly, blunt language of “the sinful church” or the like is absent from the regular liturgy, even if, as we will see, the language of the assembly’s need for repentance and mercy and its requests for forgiveness are quite common. A brief look at some of the fixed prayer texts, however, does show that the verbal attribution of holiness to the church is rooted deeply in our liturgical language. In the regular order of the Mass, the church is almost never mentioned *without* being described as holy, even if other attributes are sometimes added, notably in the creed. The phrase “the holy church” is deep in our collective Christian DNA and goes back to some of the earliest prayer texts and creedal statements that have been passed down over the centuries.

As I noted above, one very early creed, the “Roman Symbol” of the second century, refers simply to belief in “the holy church.” And even adding “catholic” or “apostolic,” as in the later Nicene Creed, seems to have begun more as a way of identifying a particular community (i.e., the broad “catholic” church as opposed to a smaller or more localized church) rather than as predicating a particular quality of the church. Given that history, Paul O’Callaghan argues that the statement of the Apostles’ Creed “Credo . . . sanctam Ecclesiam catholicam” is best translated as “I believe that the Catholic Church is holy,” in which case ecclesial holiness is one of the most basic creedal statements about the church.¹⁴ Another early church text,¹⁵

13. For ease of language, in this section I will be referring periodically to “the Mass,” “the liturgy,” “the Eucharist,” etc. Unless otherwise indicated, by this I intend the Ordinary Form of the Latin Rite of the Roman Catholic Church, as currently practiced according to the English-language Roman Missal of 2010.

14. Paul O’Callaghan, “The Holiness of the Church in Early Christian Creeds,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 54 (1988): 59–60.

15. The provenance and dating of the Apostolic Tradition is strikingly difficult, and contested. See Paul Bradshaw, Maxwell Johnson, and L. Edward Phillips, *The Apostolic Tradition*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2002), 1–17; and Hippolytus, *On the Apostolic Tradition*, ed. Alistair Stewart, 2nd ed. (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2015), 15–62, for a sense of the complexities involved. For my purposes here, it is less important whether it was written by a single author at Rome (Stewart) or collected over a longer period from various sources (Bradshaw) than that at an early date, the “holy church” was being regularly invoked in prayer.

the “Apostolic Tradition” sometimes attributed to Hippolytus of Rome, goes further and incorporates the “holy church” in a number of doxologies, e.g., “But in every blessing let there be said: ‘To you [be] glory, Father and Son with the Holy Spirit, in the holy church, both now and always and to the ages of ages.’”¹⁶ Further, we find texts like the prayer before the preface of the eucharistic prayer, “May the Lord accept the sacrifice at your hands / for the praise and glory of his name, / for our good / and the good of all his holy Church.”¹⁷

Interestingly, the one place in the regular texts of the Mass where the church is not described as holy comes at the place where the paradox between its holiness and sinfulness is on view; that is, in the prayer that precedes the sign of peace: “Lord Jesus Christ, / who said to your Apostles: / Peace I leave you, my peace I give you, / look not on our sins, / but on the faith of your Church, / and graciously grant her peace and unity / in accordance with your will.” This tension—between the first-person plural of “our sins” and the second-person description of “your Church”—raises in stark form a number of the questions guiding this book. Are only the sins “ours,” or is the faith “ours” as well? What is the relation between those gathered at the table, who have just asked for forgiveness of their trespasses in praying the Lord’s Prayer, and this church? The text of the prayer, and any attempt to simply stack up texts from either the regular texts of the Mass or collects and other prayers from the liturgical year, is insufficient on its own as a source for a liturgical theology of ecclesial holiness. The simple reason is that the Mass is not a text, but a ritual, and as such is an embodied, repeated, imperfect, and at times ambivalent process. It involves words, yes, but also actions, bodily movements, periods of silence, different kinds of linguistic expression from singing and chanting to responding and even whispering. Analyzing the words of a particular prayer or response is crucial to our task, but looking only at the words, or at the words abstracted from the richer context in which they are said, sung, or

16. “Apostolic Tradition” 6:4, in Bradshaw et al., *The Apostolic Tradition* 52. See also Bradshaw’s discussion of the few other places where the church is incorporated in early doxologies at 54.

17. The word “holy” had been omitted in the 1973 English-language Sacramentary.

heard, is therefore analogous to proof texting with scraps of Scripture ripped from the context of their overall narratives and books. In what follows, therefore, I would like to explore some of the words we pray within the wider context of the rhythm of the Mass, the order of approach and retreat that characterizes the church's relation to God's holiness.

The Introductory Rites of the Mass in which the assembly is first gathered provide a helpful starting movement in this ecclesial dance. Some of the elements that will repeat throughout the liturgy, and that are relevant to our discussion here, first occur in these Introductory Rites. First, the entrance, and the priority given to the use of music at that point in the liturgy and at Communion, points to the fundamentally communal nature of Christian prayer in general and in the eucharistic liturgy in particular; the purpose of the Introductory Rites "is to ensure that the faithful, who come together as one, establish communion and dispose themselves properly to listen to the Word of God and to celebrate the Eucharist worthily" (*General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, 46). Second, the greeting of presider and congregation, and their mutual affirmation of the presence of the Lord ("The Lord be with you. / And with your spirit."), place this particular expression of ecclesial participation in the holiness of God into a wider context—grace precedes this particular assembly, both in the individual biographies of the assembled and in the history of the church.

Third, this very act of gathering possesses significance. In a world marked by division and polarization, sometimes violently so, and by increasing self-segregation into homogenous, like-minded communities, the very act of gathering functions as a strategic interruption of "the normal" in our world. Drawing upon the challenging theology of Johann Baptist Metz, Bruce Morrill, writing of this interruption, suggests that "the assembly's work [in gathering] is a highly purposeful act and, as such, a type of revelation, if we attend to how its social and symbolic proclamation of the Gospel, through words, signs, and gestures, disrupts our conventional knowledge of 'the way things are.'"¹⁸ While not automatic or always consistent, the eucharistic assembly is designed to bring together around one anam and

18. Morrill, *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist*, 34.

one table a new people made up of individuals and communities, in a particular place and time, who were either passively indifferent or actively hostile to each other. Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, drawing upon this image of reconciliation between divided others in 1 Peter 2:10 and Ephesians 2:14, thus sees in the church as assembly, and particularly in its eucharistic assembly, the beginnings of what he names “*l’humanité-que-Dieu-veut*,” “the humanity-that-God-wills,” in which differences between peoples that were a basis of past division or oppression can become mutually enriching around the same table.¹⁹ Liturgical assembly, therefore, can function as an interruption of evident evils like sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism, as well as the more subtle flaws of mutual indifference and estrangement between communities in an increasingly atomized and self-sorting world.

Following this initial act of gathering, the Penitential Act and Kyrie constitute a major part of the Introductory Rites as well as a primary place in which the church asks pardon for its sinfulness and expresses confidence in God’s forgiving mercy. This is particularly true when the Gloria is omitted, as during Sundays in Lent and Advent or during most weekday Eucharists, though even the Gloria, in its three-fold petition to Christ who “takes away the sins of the world” to have mercy upon the community, echoes the penitential character of the earlier prayers. Given the collapse in the practice of individual confession and absolution in contemporary U.S. Catholicism,²⁰ the Penitential Act and Kyrie are the most common, and often the only, time in which Catholics explicitly confess their sin and receive forgiveness in the form of absolution.

The elements of the Penitential Act and Kyrie, particularly in their current postconciliar form, have a complicated history.²¹ There are

19. See Brian Flanagan, *Communion, Diversity and Salvation* (London: T & T Clark, 2011), 86–90.

20. See Bruce Morrill, “Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion? Differing Views of Power—Ecclesial, Sacramental, Anthropological—among Hierarchy and Laity,” *Theological Studies* 75 (2014): 585–612.

21. See John Baldovin, “Kyrie Eleison and the Entrance Rite of the Roman Eucharist,” *Worship* 60 (1986): 334–47; and Peter Jeffery, “The Meaning and Functions of Kyrie Eleison,” in *The Place of Christ in Liturgical Prayer*, ed. Bryan D. Spinks (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008), 127–94.

three formulas for the Penitential Act (Roman Missal, 515–20). Formula A incorporates the *Confiteor* prayer, as in the prayers at the foot of the altar in the previous Mass of John XXIII.²² Formula B consists of a short, biblically inspired dialogue between the presider and congregation, and is infrequently used in U.S. English-speaking context.²³ Formula C consists of a threefold Kyrie/Christe Eleison, with the opportunity for direct, thematic invocations of Christ (e.g., “You were sent to heal the contrite of heart: / Lord, have mercy. / You came to call sinners: / Christ, have mercy. / You are seated at the right hand of the Father to intercede for us: / Lord, have mercy.”). With the possible exception of use of Formula A during Lent, Formula C is likely the most dominant usage in the U.S. These prayers are followed by a collective prayer of absolution, followed by the Kyrie Eleison if Formula A or B has been used. Comparable formulas can be found in other western forms of eucharistic prayer, though sometimes in different forms and different locations (for instance, the opening Collect for Purity and optional Kyrie, and the pre-communion Confession of Sin and absolution, in the Rites for Holy Eucharist of the Book of Common Prayer of the Episcopal Church). Similarly, requests for mercy, freedom from sin, and purity repeat in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom and other forms of the Divine Liturgy of the Eastern churches.

Beyond the details of the texts, I would like to highlight three important aspects of the current form of the Penitential Act and, by doing so, to draw out some of the deep roots of a fuller liturgical

22. This is the Mass identified by Pope Benedict XVI in his *motu proprio Summorum Pontificum* as the “Extraordinary Form of the Roman Rite,” as distinct from the Ordinary Form of the 1969 Missal analyzed here. It is often referred to as the “Tridentine Mass” or the “Traditional Latin Mass,” and is the last in a series of Roman Missals dating back to the sixteenth-century standardization of the Mass after the Council of Trent. For a history of the Roman Missals, see Joanne M. Pierce and John F. Romano, “The *Ordo Missae* of the Roman Rite: Historical Background,” in *A Commentary on the Order of the Roman Missal*, ed. Edward Foley, John Francis Baldovin, Mary Collins, and Joanne M. Pierce (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2011), 3–33.

23. Presider: “Have mercy on us, Lord.”

Congregation: “For we have sinned against you.”

P: “Show us, O Lord, your mercy.”

C: “And grant us your salvation.” (Roman Missal, 516–17.)

ecclesiology. First, the confession of sin and request for mercy is a collective act, in which the whole assembly confesses its sin and asks God for pardon. Notably for later discussions about the relation between clergy and laity, while the presider has, appropriately, a leading role and pronounces the general absolution, the presider's language remains in the first-person plural, even in the absolution which asks that "almighty God have mercy on *us*, / forgive *us* our sins, / and bring *us* to everlasting life."²⁴ Even in the first-person language of the *Confiteor*, the request for the prayers of the entire church, and the communal recitation of the prayer, make it clear that it is not "I" as a disconnected individual who is asking for God's mercy, but a "we" formed through our being gathered as an assembly/church who together are confessing our fault and asking for mercy.²⁵

Second, for most churchgoing Roman Catholics, this act of collective repentance and absolution has become the ordinary form in which we confess our sin and receive pardon and peace. Given the collapse of individual auricular confession, except among a dedicated minority of Catholics and at particular penitential services during Lent and Advent, Catholics most often confess their sins collectively in this Penitential Act rather than individually in the confessional. The *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* makes clear that the absolution "lacks the efficacy of the Sacrament of Penance" (no. 51). Nevertheless, to distinguish this absolution from that of the sacrament of penance does not invalidate the real sacramental efficacy of the penitential rite: "Faithful to the great tradition of the church, this understanding in no way denies that the forgiveness of God proclaimed and conferred at the conclusion of the penitential act is sacramental; with real efficacy, this act achieves what it proclaims and signifies."²⁶ Explicitly named an "absolution," and not a "blessing,"

24. Roman Missal, 515, 517, 519. Emphasis added.

25. Joseph Ratzinger goes further: "On the one hand, one speaks of the 'I.' 'I' have sinned, and I do not confess the sins of others. I don't confess the anonymous sins of the collective. I confess with my 'I.' But at the same time, it is all of the members who with their 'I' say 'I have sinned.' The entire living church in all its living members says 'I have sinned.' Cited in Goffredo Boselli, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy*, trans. Barry Hudock (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2014), 40.

26. Boselli, *The Spiritual Meaning of the Liturgy*, 45–46.

this ritual element may have effectively replaced the sacrament of penance for most Catholics as their primary experience of confession of sin and reception of forgiveness—which entails some possible loss. Nevertheless, there may be some gain in the fact that this form can help counteract an overly individualistic understanding of sin and grace, and in the way repentance and forgiveness are more explicitly embedded in the context of the Eucharist.

The location of confession of sin and reception of mercy in relation to the eucharistic liturgy as a whole is the third aspect to be emphasized. Rather than a distraction or, as in auricular confession, as a discrete and perhaps individualized event, the penitential rite functions as a first step in our movement as the gathered assembly toward greater participation in the life of the Holy One. This early ritual moment in Mass provides a turning point in which, after being gathered together, the first thing the *ecclesia* as *ecclesia* does is to pause in repentance for its sinfulness and confidently ask for pardon from the Lord. While dramatically simplified compared to the Extraordinary Form or to some Eastern divine liturgies, the threefold repetition of the Kyrie Eleison is an important moment in which we leave behind the “normal” and, particularly in contrast to the informal nature of some presiders’ post-entrance greeting, enter into ritual time and movement.

This moment, therefore, constitutes an initial pause in the movement toward participation in God’s holiness, and the first instance of a pattern that will repeat throughout the liturgy. First, we as the assembly take a step of approach toward the Holy One. Yet in doing so, we recognize the need to pause or even retreat in awareness of our distance from the “mysterium tremendum,”²⁷ a distance that can be attributed either to our own creatureliness and limitation in relation to the Creator of the cosmos (think Moses taking off his sandals before the burning bush in Exod 3:1-6) or to our impurity or sinfulness (think Isa 6:5: “Woe is me! I am lost, for I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips; yet my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!”). Then, in a second moment, the act of pause

27. A reference to the groundbreaking work of Rudolf Otto. See Rudolf Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, trans. John W. Harvey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958).

and of repentance makes us receptive of God's grace—grace that reaches across the gap between our limitations and God's glory, and between our sinfulness and God's sanctity. The act of ritually naming our distance from God allows God to draw us in closer. In this moment, our confession of sin allows our reception of absolution, and our awareness of distance gives us the ability to rightly begin our praise of God in the Gloria and our prayer to God in opening collect, and to rightly receive the word of God proclaimed in the Scriptures. Like someone fasting or, more dramatically, a person living with an eating disorder who has tragically lost the ability to feel hunger, we can become aware of our need for God in this moment, and relearn that need for God each time we pause liturgically to become individually and collectively aware of our hunger. If this is an accurate analysis, then this ritual datum has profound implications for how we understand the holiness and sinfulness of the church writ large: the church grows closer to God and participates more fully in God's holiness not by denying its own creaturely limitations and sinful woundedness, but through confession of its sins and of its needs for God's healing grace.

This pattern recurs and intensifies as the Mass continues and the assembly approaches the altar, pauses for awareness and purification, and then receives the invitation to further participation in God. This occurs through the words of the ritual but also through ritual gesture and posture. In most parishes of the United States, immediately after the *Sanctus*, in which we attempt to echo the angels in acclaiming the thrice-holy God (see Isaiah 6:3 and Revelation 4:8), the congregation immediately kneels for the eucharistic prayer. Kneeling in the liturgy has a complicated history, and historically has sometimes been a posture of adoration of God and sometimes a posture of repentance for sin; as Antonio Donghi writes, combining these two aspects, "Kneeling in order to give hospitality to the truth that comes from on high teaches us the sense of our own poverty as creatures and of our weakness as sinners. When we kneel we express our desire to be in harmony with Christ, and at the same time we point to the strong dissonance between such a gift and our own concrete existence."²⁸

28. Antonio Donghi, *Words and Gestures in the Liturgy* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2009), 14. For more on the question of kneeling, see John Leonard and

Even though United States bishops adapted the Roman Missal by directing communal kneeling for the entire eucharistic prayer and not simply the consecration in order to promote a particular kind of eucharistic piety, I would contend that there is a blending of humility and penitence in this particular posture that constitutes another “pause” in the liturgy for self-reflection and purification.²⁹

Following the doxology, the culmination of the liturgy in the reception of Communion includes numerous elements in which the assembly continues to express its limitations and need for forgiveness, even as we process, figuratively and literally, to the altar. First, in the Lord’s Prayer, we pray the words Jesus gave us that both beg for the full arrival of the reign of God and request our own forgiveness, made good in our forgiveness of those who have sinned against us. The post-Lord’s Prayer embolism then asks that “by the help of [the Lord’s] mercy, / we may be always free from sin.” Second, in the sign of peace, the forgiveness of trespassers is made ritually explicit in the offer of a sign “that expresses peace, communion, and charity” (Roman Missal, 667). While this symbolically extends to the assembly as a whole and those not present, it often includes those most proximate to us in life as in liturgy, our family and friends from whom we most often need to ask forgiveness and to whom we are called to offer it. Third, the litany requesting mercy and peace from the Lamb of God, “who takes away the sins of the world,” echoes the threefold Kyrie of the penitential rite. Finally, before physically approaching the sacrament, the assembly prays, “Lord, I am not worthy / that you should enter under my roof, / but only say the word / and my soul shall be healed.” While it’s a dangerous temptation to overemphasize any particular text as though the assembly were automatically formed by it, this prayer captures succinctly the tension between

Nathan Mitchell, *The Postures of the Assembly during the Eucharistic Prayer* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1994), 26–38 and 66–79; and Paul Levesque, “Eucharistic Prayer Posture: From Standing to Kneeling,” *Questions Liturgiques* 74 (1993): 30–42.

29. Though not necessarily a development to be celebrated or maintained; Frank Quinn contends that this practice reinforces an “individualistic eucharistic devotionism” rooted in a noncommunal form of worship focused upon the priest’s agency in the moment of the consecration. See Frank C. Quinn, “Posture and Prayer,” *Worship* 72 (1998): 67–78.

the assembly's awareness of its distance from God, and of God's ability to reach across that distance in grace. And while holding those two attitudes together in one's awareness remains the work of a lifetime, you could easily get a sense of your own basic theological convictions (and that of many theologians!) by asking which aspect of that prayer seems more "natural" or less of a challenge of faith—awareness of one's unworthiness before God, or confidence in God's healing grace.

It cannot be underemphasized that at this point in the liturgy the assembly stands, if kneeling, and then physically moves forward in procession, one of the oldest forms of Christian ritual action. In doing so we enact bodily the movement toward the source of holiness in a manner both personal and communal; having received the sacrament as an assembly, we are then empowered to be the body of Christ, the *corpus verum* in the most ancient sense of the term.³⁰ As much as any particular words, this collective bodily movement that began with the gathering of the assembly in its recognition of the need for grace now culminates in its limited yet real participation in the holiness of God. Without artificially separating out any single moment of the Mass such as the consecration or invocation of the spirit, in the overall ritual the assembly expresses itself as both a sinful group of humans in need of God's mercy and as the holy assembly, the body of Christ that is and becomes what it receives in the Eucharist.

This tension between being and becoming, and the fact that the same movement away from sin and toward holiness is repeated weekly, even daily in the Catholic Church, will be a touchstone for my later reflections on how to understand the church's participation in the overflowing mystery of God, on one hand, and the absurd mystery of sin and evil on the other. Gordon Lathrop discusses this tension, drawing upon the love of paradox classical in his Lutheran tradition, while analyzing a comparable dialogue in the Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom of the Eastern churches. Just before the reception

30. In his classic text, Henri de Lubac traced the history of how the terms *corpus verum* ("true body") and *corpus mysticum* ("mystical body") once referred to the church and the Eucharist, respectively, and came to be reversed in the face of medieval controversies over the presence of Christ in the Eucharist. See Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*, trans. Gemma Simmonds, with Richard Price and Christopher Stephens (South Bend, IN: University of Notre Dame, 2007).

of the sacrament, i.e., parallel to the “Lord, I am not worthy” prayer of the Catholic Church, the presider chants what Lathrop calls “an invitation and warning,” namely, “holy things for the holy people”; in response, the congregation simultaneously reaffirms the holiness of God while denying to itself any independent holiness apart from its Lord: “One is holy, one is Lord, Jesus Christ.” Lathrop continues:

“This dialogue stands as a paradigm of mercy set next to loss, grace set next to judgment, life to death, hope to despair, inclusion to exclusion, God to the gods. The clearest name of these contradictions is Jesus Christ. Christian faith believes that the power of the contradiction in our midst is the Spirit of Christ risen.”³¹

An *Ordo* of Ecclesial Sin and Sanctity in Time and Place

Having completed this brief summary of at least some of the ways the ordinary liturgy discusses the assembly’s holiness and its limitations, can we discern a pattern? As I suggested earlier, I think we can—a pattern of *approaching* or *drawing near* to God’s holiness; of *pausing* or even *retreating* in recognition of our own limitations, due to our nature as creatures and to our awareness of our own sinfulness; and yet a real if incomplete *participation* in God’s holiness. Lathrop and other liturgical theologians call this basic form of Christian worship an *ordo*, a regular pattern of Christian worship which, notwithstanding all the variety, past and present, that one finds in forms of Christian liturgy, has a tendency to structure how the Christian liturgy “says” who God is and what all things are in relation to God.³² Lathrop’s work highlights what he calls the “basic patterns” of the Christian order, all in terms of juxtapositions: the juxtaposition of seven days and the eighth day; of the word and the table; of praising God and beseeching God; etc. He asserts that “juxtaposition as a tool of meaning”³³ is characteristic of Christian liturgy’s tendency to place seemingly paradoxical elements in relation so as to open the

31. Gordon Lathrop, *Holy Things* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 132–33.

32. See Lathrop, 33–53. See also the crucial development of the idea of the *ordo* by Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann in *Introduction to Liturgical Theology* (Yonkers, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1966).

33. Lathrop, 79.

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