

CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE SELF IN SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

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The problem raised in this session is well stated in Eugene Fontinell's observation that while the Western world "manifests a near obsession with the individual self" it has also produced "critiques that radically undermine beliefs in any identifiable, real, individual self."¹ Yet the major thrust of classical sacramental theology—causality²—implicitly required a "real" self. Renewal in sacramental and liturgical theologies, which utilize symbolic theory and images of transformation in place of Aristotelian causality, will be hampered without a correlative shift in the understanding of the self as subject of liturgical and sacramental action.

Gelpi considered the individual subject of worship existing and deriving sacramental identity in the subject of worship itself, the converting Christian community. The communal character of the subject of sacramental worship requires that one conceive both community and individual in relational terms. Both are developing human experiences, differing as experiences to the degree that personal consciousness differs from communal awareness. Personal consciousness grows through making distinctions and grasping relationships. Communal awareness grows through (1) sharing memories: reaching consensus about the significance of the founding event and their links to it; (2) sharing hopes: shaping a consciously shared future by reaching a consensus about the goals the community endorses; (3) sharing lives: realizing at least some shared goals by mobilizing the gifts of every member of the community.

The social communal character of the ultimate subject of sacramental worship requires a method capable of dealing with both personal and shared awareness; transcendental method focuses narrowly on the individual subject and lacks the means to deal with shared communal awareness. Gelpi showed that

¹Eugene Fontinell, "The Return of 'Selves'," *Cross Currents* 43 (1993) 358-74, at 358.

²Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 1995) 7-8.

pragmatic logic, especially that of C. S. Peirce, allows one to deal with both communal and individual subjects because it recognizes the social dialogic character of human thinking. The normative sciences of aesthetics, ethics and logic in Peircean pragmatism deal with the issues which preoccupy transcendental method, but do so in a much more explicitly social, dialogic context than does strict Kantian transcendental method. Pragmatic logic would allow one to construe a metaphysical and normative understanding of the converting Christian community and the converting persons who make up that community.

Seubert presented the philosophy of the French phenomenologist, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, who understands the relation of the human self with the world in a way that overcomes the separation of the thinking subject and the object of thought in Cartesianism, modern science and certain forms of phenomenology. Merleau-Ponty's view of perception and life is based on our being bodily selves in and with the world. This connection surfaces in an intuition of self and world in both their phenomenal aspects and their genesis as dehiscences into visibility of universal Being. The painter is Merleau-Ponty's paradigm for this way of being and perceiving. The act of painting itself is depicted as bringing to further visibility and dehiscence the life of the world in which the painter is involved. Seubert argued that this is a parallel to ritual activity's role in bringing to visibility the power of life that forms the Christian community.

Seubert found this illustrated in the anakephalaiosis of the Christological hymn of Ephesians 1, interpreting Paul's language about the relationship of God, Jesus Christ, and the believing community as the sacramental transformation of reality into the All. In the death of Christ, the life of God has been irrevocably woven into the fabric of history; the community, in its role as assembly and its life in the world, is the place of the continued transformation/recapitulation of the world which has begun definitively in the death of Jesus. The insights of Merleau-Ponty can be used to investigate the bodily being of the community in and with the world and its history, and to demonstrate how, in its ritualizing, it brings to greater visibility and effect the process begun within history in the death of Jesus Christ.

Agnew presented Julia Kristeva's notion of the subject in-process/on-trial for consideration as a tool of analysis in the renewal of sacramental and liturgical theology. She pointed out that Chauvet's work speaks directly to the importance of the subject in its proposal for overcoming the onto-theology responsible for framing the sacraments in terms of a productive causality, by recasting them in terms of language and the symbolic. Chauvet believes this would have the effect of shifting theology's thrust from "stressing the unknowability of God" toward "the believing *subjects* (italics in original) themselves."³ He invokes psychoanalytic theory, particularly that of Jacques Lacan, noting that, along with linguistics,

³Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 41.

it makes concrete what philosophy sketches out.⁴ Beyond this is Lacan's differentiation between the ego and the subject, and his claim that "rather than being the agency through which self-development occurs, the ego is characterized by a refusal of the dynamic that, for Lacan, constitutes the subject in pursuit of truth."⁵ The development of the subject, over against the ego, "involves interpersonal relations and the formative structure of the symbolic order."⁶

Pressing beyond Lacan, Julia Kristeva posits a subject in-process/on-trial, with a prelinguistic capacity for meaning (the semiotic), always leaving its trace on the linguistic code (the symbolic, in her terms). The subject, then, is not only capable of, but requires (for its struggle with the ego), engagement with the cultural/symbolic order. Thus, the subject is constituted for this task, and insofar as sacramental and liturgical actions provide a particular cultural/symbolic order, engagement in them can structure the subject in a particular way—to provide a transformation that is not the result of productive causality. A self "in-process" provides a tool for retrieval of the notion that one "grows in grace" in reception of the sacraments; a self "on trial" is particularly receptive to a pneumatological interpretation of the liturgy as prayer, especially in the Spirit's role as Advocate.

Discussion raised the question of psychological reductionism in the use of Kristeva and of an opening toward a totalitarian community in the use of modern pragmatism. Cleo McNelly Kearns' remarks about "prière féminine," prayer that seeks "not an abstract true-real . . . to which it can cling, but rather looks to find a space for . . . something far more deeply interfused"⁷ extends Kristeva's thought into an area implicit in liturgy. Her search for a "third term" between the semiotic and the symbolic suggests the world of creativity of Merleau-Ponty. Issues of conversion raise further questions of the link between sacraments and ethics.

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⁴Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 79, citing A. Juranville, *Lacan et la Philosophie* (Paris: PUF, 1984) 439-40.

⁵James DiCenso, "Symbolism and Subjectivity: a Lacanian Approach to Religion," *Journal of Religion* 74 (January 1994) 45-64, at 55.

⁶*Ibid.*, 56.

⁷"Art and Religious Discourse in Aquinas and Kristeva," in *Body/Text in Julia Kristeva: Religion, Women, and Psychoanalysis*, ed. David Crownfield (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992) 111-24, at 120.