HOW CAN WE SING THE SONG OF THE LORD?

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What conditions make worship possible? What theology best supports our public worship? This article explores what we might call the conditions for the possibility of good worship. Reviewing the work of Jean-Luc Marion and Catherine Pickstock, the author challenges those charged with leadership to attend to the power of liturgy, especially as it affects our identity. Communal worship, properly understood and celebrated, can shape the beliefs, values, behaviors, and vision of Catholic school leaders.

I. PROLOGUE: "SUNDAY MORNING"

"Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is"

December; bleak midwinter; dying light gathers itself into tight knots of warmth that protest the inexorable, numbing approach of darkness and cold. Autumn's ambivalence has surrendered at last to what Wallace Stevens calls the "mind of winter," that detached state of neutral attention that simply looks and listens, without interference, without willfulness, without imposing emotions and interpretations. "One must have a mind of winter," Stevens writes, "And have been cold a long time / To behold the junipers shagged with ice, / The spruces rough in the distant glitter" (1978, pp. 9-10). One must have a seer's mind not to hear misery in the moaning wind or despair in the rasping leaves. For a seer, Stevens suggests, is one who has become the very act of seeing, one "who listens in the snow, / And, nothing himself, beholds / Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is" (1978, p. 10).

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Stevens was a poet preoccupied by the defining doubt of our species as it is hurled into the third millennium: Are experiences of transcendence possible in a world like ours? Are they necessary? Are they believable? It is an ancient, honorable practice, of course, for poets to find in nature's ambiguity—its shameless cunning in the creation of new life coupled with its amnesic indifference toward the fate of individuals—a fertile source of metaphors for the human condition. Perhaps nowhere else in Stevens' work is this ambivalence more keenly felt that in his poem "Sunday Morning." Many scholars read "Sunday Morning" as Stevens' robust renunciation of Christianity (or of any revealed religion) in favor of a "religion of the real," a worship of things palpable and earthly. And it is true that throughout this magnificent poem, the realm of the religious is linked to distance, darkness, shade, and silence—while the visible world is celebrated in a riotous concretion of experience—in exuberant images of light, motion, color, and closeness. Thus "Sunday," the pinnacle of the Christian week, is described by Stevens as dark and deadly, a day "like wide water, without sound"—in somber contrast to earth's natural beauty and bounty, its "pungent oranges and bright, green wings":

> Complacencies of the peignoir, and late
> Coffee and oranges in a sunny chair,
> And the green freedom of a cockatoo
> Upon a rug mingle to dissipate
> The holy hush of ancient sacrifice.
> She dreams a little, and she feels the dark
> Encroachment of that old catastrophe,
> As a calm darkens among water-light....
> The day is like wide water, without sound,
> Stilled for the passing of her dreaming feet
> Over the seas, to silent Palestine,
> Dominion of the blood and sepulchre. (1978, pp. 66-67)

On the surface, "Sunday Morning" seems to be a brave humanist manifesto, a declaration that the life of the senses is sufficient, that there really is "world enough and time," that religion is repressive, ruthless, idle, speculative and, sometimes, bloodthirsty. In Stevens's art, however, surfaces rarely yield a poem's secrets—and "Sunday Morning" is no exception. Throughout the poem, two speakers—male and female—vie for the reader's attention and allegiance. The male voice insists, repeatedly, that human vision is inescapably earth-bound, that transcendence is illusory, that meaning arises solely from physical sensation. "Supple and turbulent," the male voice boasts, "a ring of men / Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn / Their boisterous devotion to the sun, / Not as a god, but as a god might be, / Naked among them, like a savage source" (Stevens, 1978, pp. 69-70). And as though

he were reading the thoughts of the anonymous woman in the poem (who has chosen to spend a leisurely Sunday morning seated in a sunny chair, sipping coffee, staying far away from church), the male speaker asks:

> Why should she give her bounty to the dead?
> What is divinity if it can come
> Only in silent shadows and in dreams?
> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings,...
> Things to be cherished like the thought of heaven? (Stevens, 1978, p. 67)

But the woman is anxious, uneasy, uncertain that her sensations, memories, and dreams—her "desire for June and evening" (p. 68) —are everything she needs (or all she can experience) of imperishability and transcendence:

> She says, "I am content when wakened birds,
> Before they fly, test the reality
> Of misty fields, by their sweet questionings;
> But when the birds are gone, and their warm fields
> Return no more, where, then, is paradise?..."
> She says, "But in contentment I still feel
> The need of some imperishable bliss..." (Stevens, 1978, p. 68)

Even the self-confident male voice in the poem—after insisting we can happily reconcile ourselves to a planet without God—admits that life in this world is often chaotic, fractious, aimless, and incomplete. "We live in an old chaos of the sun," he says, "Or old dependence of day and night, / Or island solitude, unsponsored, free / Of that wide water, inescapable" (1978, p. 70). Perhaps, he hints, even this bright paradise—where all we know of heaven is an orgiastic romp on a summer morning—will fade and fall as night steals over the bent world.

What emerges at the end of "Sunday Morning," then, is the painful, troubling recognition that neither the comfortable assurances of old-time religion nor the aggressive, liberal optimism of this-worldly faith will suffice on a planet where all things human drift toward death, sinking "downward to darkness" (1978, p. 70). Neither option works well in a world where "sweet berries" do "ripen in the wilderness," but sweeter children die of drugs and gunfire in our schools. Using nature itself as icon, Stevens found he could not blink before the entropic forces that, like a fierce rip tide, suck the world downward toward isolation and oblivion.

> ...in the isolation of the sky,
> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings. (1978, p. 70)

Earlier in the poem, Stevens suggests that "Death is the mother of beauty." And indeed, every work of art is a protest against mortality, a wager against the dying of the light. If what perishes cannot be loved, then no thing and no one can be loved. But what kind of God (if you are religious) or what kind of planet (if you are not) would lead us to love so deeply what we will surely lose? Old-time religion says, "Love the imperishable—because what dies will rise"; liberal optimism says, "Love the perishable—because what dies stays dead." Stevens's poem, perhaps, is more honest—and more terrifying—than either of these options. It ends with neither bang nor whimper, but with the ambiguous image of a bird in flight, caught between the lifting of a wing (extended to soar above earth) and the final falling into darkness.

WHAT KIND OF GOD?

Most readers have probably felt this schizoid terror of being "caught" between the lifting wing and the falling darkness. We seem, often, to live between two worlds: one bright and beautiful, restored and redeemed, charged ebulliently with God's grandeur...shining like shaken foil; the other cold, dark and desolate, a world without God where every human cry meets silence, shame, and ridicule. We are caught between our longing for the simple certitude of coffee and oranges, a sunny chair and a cockatoo's green freedom—and our nervous suspicion that God's ways aren't ours. Anxiety, fear, and cowardice can make a believer out of even the most devout hedonist. For as Stevens suggests in another poem, our "faith may" often be little more than a hedge—or a resentment:

> If there must be a god in the house, must be,
> Saying things in the rooms and on the stair,
> Let him move as the sunlight moves on the floor,
> Or moonlight, silently, as Plato's ghost
> Or Aristotle's skeleton. (1978, p. 327)

Later, Stevens concludes that if we must have a god, "let him be one / That will not hear us when we speak: a coolness, / A vermilioned nothingness" (1978, p. 328). For most Christians, of course, such a god is no God, for we believe in a Creator who is not "Plato's ghost," but the passionate partner of earth and its people. Bred of breath, bone and blood, we cannot believe in a God who will not cry when we weep. Any lesser God would be a betrayal of ourselves, of our world—indeed, of the very record of revelation. The taunting complaint of the ancient Hebrew poet who wrote Psalm 44 still rings true today:

you rejected us, humiliated us,
[You] no longer march at our side...
You banished us to a wilderness
where darkness swallows us alive...
Wake up! Why are you asleep? Wake up!
Why do you hide your face?

Even more chilling are the final bitter verses of Psalm 88:

My bed is death, my couch is a grave.
You have pushed me down into the lowest pit...
Why do you hide your face?...
I am numb.
Your furies have swept down upon me;
your terrors have utterly destroyed me...
Friend and neighbor you have taken away;
my one companion is darkness.

But perhaps the most searing accusations of all come from our own century, from the work of Holocaust poet Nelly Sachs, who was awarded the Nobel Prize for literature in 1967. Her poems are modern psalms—hard, transparent, unblinking as they face the blackest reality of our century, the Shoah.

O the chimneys
On the ingeniously devised habitations of death
When Israel's body drifted as smoke
Through the air—
Was welcomed by a star, a chimney sweep,
A star that turned black
Or was it a ray of sun? (Sachs, 1967, p. 3)

In this poem there is neither redeemed world nor rescuing God. There is only the horror of Israel's body drifting as smoke through the air. There are only shadows, stones, and stars—echoes of hunter and hunted, orphans and survivors. Through its unspeakable torment, Israel becomes an icon of all creation's fortune and misfortune. Israel's dust, smoke and ashes become the world's. Soot, wings, butterflies, footsteps, flight—these images unfold and intertwine endlessly throughout Sachs's poems (Sachs, 1967, p. xi). Her art creates a cosmology, the map of a new and terrifying world—a cosmos come to consciousness in the death camps of Auschwitz, Dachau, Belsen, Jadwiga. It is a world where everything except memory has been erased.

We can still tap the memory of Etty Hillesum, a young Jewish woman who (like Anne Frank) kept a diary of her vanishing life (she perished at

Auschwitz in 1943). Among her literary remains is an astonishing prayer in which she comforts a suffering God:

> Dear God...Tonight for the first time I lay in the dark with burning eyes as scene after scene of human suffering passed before me.... One thing is becoming increasingly clear to me; that You cannot help us, that we must help You to help ourselves. And that is all we can manage these days and also all that really matters: that we safeguard that little piece of You, God, in ourselves. And perhaps in others as well...You cannot help us but we must help You and defend Your dwelling place inside us to the last...The jasmine behind my house has been completely ruined by the rains and storms of the last few days, its white blossoms are floating about in muddy black pools on the low garage roof. But somewhere inside me the jasmine continues to blossom undisturbed, just as profusely and delicately as ever it did. And it spreads its scent round the House in which You dwell, oh God. You can see, I look after you, I bring You not only my tears and my forebodings...I bring you scented jasmine. (Pomerans, 1983, pp. 151-152)

The God of Etty Hillesum is not only One who cries when we weep, but One who has forever disappeared in clouds and jasmine, in the smoking ruins of a hundred human furnaces.

II. THE "IMPOSSIBILITY OF LITURGY"

It is perhaps not surprising, then, that many scholars today, especially those from Europe, speak of the "impossibility" of both theology and worship. This theme is sounded strongly in recent work by Jean-Luc Marion (1991) and Catherine Pickstock (1998). Both writers raise troubling questions for Catholic educators. We are accustomed, rightly, to thinking of Catholic identity as a sacramental identity. Catholic consciousness is shaped less by facts, doctrines, and information and more by the stories, songs, smells, sensations, and nonverbal symbols encountered in ritual activity—especially (though not exclusively) the Eucharistic liturgy. As Andrew Greeley wrote famously in a 1994 essay in *The New York Times Magazine*,

> Religion is experience, image and story before it is anything else and after it is everything else. Catholics like their heritage because it has great stories...
>
> [And] Catholicism has [such] great stories because at the center of its heritage is "sacramentalism," the conviction that God [is disclosed] in the events and persons of ordinary life. Hence Catholicism is willing to risk stories about angels and saints and souls in purgatory and Mary the Mother of Jesus and stained-glass windows and statues and stations of the cross and rosaries and medals and the whole panoply of images and devotions that were so offensive to the austere leaders of the Reformation...[The] Catholic

> heritage also has the elaborate ceremonial rituals that mark the passing of the year—Midnight Mass, the Easter Vigil, First Communion, May Crowning, Lent, Advent, grammar-school graduation, [the Day of the Dead], and the festivals of the saints.
>
> The religious images of Catholicism are acquired early in life and are tenacious. You may break with the institution, you may reject the propositions, but you cannot escape the images (Greeley, 1994, p. 41).

Greeley's conclusion was simple but profound: no one can take the Church away from the people—because people ultimately get their faith not from prelates, potentates, doctrines, or disciplines, but from story and image, ritual, and art. One may scold, forbid, condemn, investigate, indict, and excommunicate, but people will keep coming back—not for more punishment, but to claim what is rightfully theirs, the ancient Catholic heritage of faith and worship rehearsed, above all, in the Sunday liturgy, at weddings, baptisms, and funerals, and on countless other occasions (Advent Penance services, Lenten Stations of the Cross, and even the parish picnic).

Greeley's argument contradicted several reports that had begun to appear in the early 1990s. Peter Steinfels, for example, had reported in June of 1994 that many Catholic catechists and educators were worried about an erosion of "distinctive Catholic identity" (p. A1). Traditional Catholic doctrine and ethics, it was said, had become so diluted and "hollowed out" that the Church's future was at risk. And indeed, an April, 1994, *New York Times*/CBS News poll revealed that perhaps two-thirds of American Catholics believe that at Mass, the consecrated bread and wine are "symbolic reminders of Christ" (p. A12) rather than realities changed into Christ's body and blood.

Modern polling processes designed to test political popularity or to register spur-of-the-moment reactions cannot, of course, measure complex religious beliefs accurately. Still, considering how central Eucharistic faith and practice have been to Catholic identity over two millennia, it is astonishing that so many Catholics might doubt what the Council of Trent affirmed as Christ's real presence "whole and entire, body and blood, soul and divinity" in the consecrated bread and wine. Traditionalists, of course, will argue that Catholics have drifted away from such authentic (read "Tridentine") doctrine because postconciliar catechesis put process ahead of content and feelings ahead of facts. Progressives will argue that this defection from traditional Eucharistic doctrine simply reflects a more pervasive distrust, among laypeople, of a Church whose official views (on sensitive matters like sexuality, the reproductive rights of women, family planning, divorce, and remarriage) are in radical conflict with the complexities of their own daily experience. And scholars on both sides of the fence may well argue that, in the United States especially, Catholic identity is threatened less by polling data than by a cul-

ture that imprisons more of its population than any other industrialized nation on earth; that settles its conflicts by gunfire; that treats murderers as celebrities; and that justifies its hatred of the poor and the homeless by claiming to suffer from "compassion fatigue." Commenting on a study of Catholic parish life published in the mid-1980s, the late Mark Searle wrote:

> There is strong evidence that American Catholics are in process of becoming more characteristically American than characteristically Catholic. In other words, cultural assimilation appears to be occurring at the expense of a distinctive Catholic identity. In their moral, political and social attitudes, Catholics are becoming indistinguishable from the rest of the population. Where liturgy is concerned, this means a growing alienation from precisely that sense of collective identity and collective responsibility which the liturgy might be thought to rehearse. It is a threat to the integrity of the liturgical act. Far from being able to inure Catholics against the negative aspects of their wider culture, the liturgy may actually be succumbing to such influences (1986, p. 333).

Professor Searle was thus quite pessimistic about the future of Christian Eucharist in a culture that seems to seek instant "transcendence without community" and automatic "community without transcendence" (Gaillardetz, 1994, p. 404).

These contrasting views—Searle's "pessimism," and Greeley's "optimism"—agree on one vital point: that Catholic worship "rehearses" Catholic identity—and that Catholic identity is thus inherently "sacramental." Indeed, the young British theologian Catherine Pickstock—who identifies herself as belonging to a postmodern theological movement known as "radical orthodoxy"—will argue that human existence is itself "doxological," that we become what we praise, and that "the event of transubstantiation in the Eucharist is the condition of possibility for all human meaning" (1998, p. xv).

We seem, indeed, to be living in a world that describes itself in terms of its "posts," its "afters": We speak of politics in the "post-Cold War era;" of postconciliar reforms in the liturgy; of the prospects (indeed, the possibility) of theology after the Holocaust; of postmodern linguistics and philosophy. If Catholic identity is shaped by sacramental worship—and if nurturing that identity is a core value at educational institutions that claim a "Catholic character"—then what are the prospects for a plausible theology of Catholic worship today? Is such a thing possible or impossible, desirable or undesirable? The paragraphs that follow will examine responses to this question in the work of two contemporary European scholars, Marion and Pickstock.

THE WORK OF JEAN-LUC MARION

Readers of Marion's *God Without Being* may well be reminded of the great Protestant theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968). Barth defended God's absolute sovereignty over all things human, insisting that God's supremacy and transcendence are not merely matters of "divine preeminence." On the contrary, God's difference—God's utter otherness from all that is created or human—is so profound that it outwits every effort by human reason to come to grips with it. In short, "theology" (in any positivistic sense) is impossible. Because the Fall has darkened the human heart and mind, reason is no longer reliable—nor can theology be constructed on the basis of either "nature" (natural theology) or experience. God is revealed only in Jesus Christ—and this Word is the only one through which God speaks to and for humanity. All other things (including humanity's cultural achievements), Barth reasoned, are rooted in sin and thus cannot possess ultimate value.

With this Barthian perspective in mind, we may summarize some of Marion's salient points in *God Without Being*, especially those that illumine our understanding of how the structures of Catholic worship shape (or fail to shape) Catholic identity today.

1. First, Marion argues that no theology is authentic unless it breaks with theology. In short, theology must renounce any positivistic pretense that it truly "speaks" of God. "Only God can speak well of God," says Marion, quoting Pascal (1991, p. 139). What makes Christian theology different from every other theology, therefore, is not the singularity of its meanings, but rather what authorizes their singularity. Christian theology speaks of Christ. But Christ does not speak words "about" God or even words "inspired by" God. Rather, Christ erases the gap between speaker and speech, between speaker and sign. "Christ," writes Marion, "does not say the word, he says himself the Word. He says himself—the Word" (1991, p. 140). In short, Christ delivers no "message" different from himself; in him, uniquely, speaker, sign (i.e., word, speech), and reference (i.e., "meaning") coincide. When Christ "is said...all is said: all is accomplished in this word that performs, in speaking, the statement that the Word pitched its tent among us (John 1:14)" (1991, p. 140). To put it another way, as God's Word, Christ performs—in speech—all that is God. So Marion concludes in a Barthian mode:

> The Word, as Said of God, no man can hear or understand adequately, so that the more men hear him speak their own words, the less their understanding grasps what the said words nevertheless say as clear as day. In return, men cannot render the Word the homage of an adequate denomination; if they can—by exceptional grace—sometimes confess him as "Son of God," they do not manage (nor ever will manage) to say him as he says himself. The

> Word is not said in any tongue, since he transgresses language itself, seeing that, Word in flesh and bone, he is given as indissolubly speaker, sign, and referent (1991, pp. 140-141).

2. Theology is thus as radically "impossible" for Marion as it was for Barth. Still, it is obvious that this has not kept teachers and preachers from talking over the past two millennia. How, then, does an impossible theological discourse become "possible"? Or should all theology be dismissed as blasphemous idolatry? "To justify its Christianity," writes Marion, "a theology must be conceived as a logos of the Logos, a word of the Word, a said of the Said" (1991, p. 143). This can happen only if theologians understand language not as something they control but as something by which they are governed, something to which they must surrender. (The diagonal line through the letter *o* of the word God [represented in the English of Marion's printed text as an *x*] is meant to show that the word God is precisely not God in any proper sense.)

> To do theology is not to speak the language of gods or of Gød, but to let the Word speak us...for in order to say Gød one first must let oneself be said by him to the point that, by this docile abandon, Gød speaks in our speech, just as in the words of the Word sounded the unspeakable Word of his Father (1991, p. 143).

Theologians, in short, must let themselves be said by the Word—just as the Word let itself be said by the Father. The theologian's first task is surrender, not control. She or he must first be spoken by God in human speech, for God speaks all our names in the Word (Marion, 1991). Marion does not explain just how such speech is possible or verifiable, though one suspects that he would suggest prayer—worship, doxology—as the preferred speech or site for all theology.

3. Impossible theology thus becomes possible on condition that theologians let themselves be spoken by God's Word. If that is so, however, what does theology talk about? What is its content, its subject matter? If we look at the Christian Scriptures, we could say that the Word seems simply to transmit words—a text. But of course it is an event—not a text—that is central to revelation. Marion draws a parallel between the way this aboriginal Christian event leaves its traces on the gospel text and the way

> a nuclear explosion leaves burns and shadows on the walls.... The text does not coincide with the event or permit going back to it.... The shadow fixed by the flash of lightning does not reproduce the lightning, unless negatively. The text assures us a negative of the event that alone constitutes the original. (Marion, 1991, p. 145)

Even in the Gospels, this gap between text and event remains.

But where does that leave us? How can such a gap be bridged? After all, the event produced the text(s)—so shouldn't it be possible to get back, somehow, to the event (the original "nuclear explosion," to use Marion's image) to which the text refers? Perhaps—but it isn't easy. After all, the texts did not produce the event—the event produced them. Thus, taken in themselves, the texts (the Christian Scriptures, especially the Gospels) cannot reconstitute the event or magically carry us back to its actual "moment" in history. There is no magic bullet that lets us, somehow, become contemporaneous with the events of Jesus' passion, death, and resurrection. The gap between text and event remains insurmountable—and in that, Marion suggests, lies its ultimate grace. For Easter is not an "interpretation" or a "meaning" or an "effect" (the fallout) of meaning, it is precisely an event (though not one limited by the conditions of space and time). As Sawicki has pointed out, the event of Easter "deconstructs" time by refusing to let the dead remain dead (that is, by refusing to consign the dead to the "past"):

> Jesus cannot be both past and risen, for to be past means not to be active and available now. The canonical texts [i.e., the Gospels] decline to identify the Risen Lord as one who is available through stories as what is past. Rather, he is on the loose beyond the canonical texts. The name of Jesus, a text, attaches itself to persons and to experiences of empowerment that turn up day by day in the infinitely varying career of the church. The referent of the Gospel texts, so to speak, is toward versions of themselves being continually inscribed into human activities: that is, toward ongoing discoveries of the Risen Lord that they make possible. (1994, p. 334)

In other words, here is a case where the referent (or reference) of a text is not a past that can be encoded (hence confined to stories), but a future that continues to unfold uncontrollably—and is sacramentally inscribed on the bodies of believers (through initiation, for example). In the event of Easter, Jesus did not become a story; he became a future. Thus, even the Easter story gets "deconstructed"; it explodes. "The story of an event confined within the past, as Easter morning, falls apart," so "resurrection cannot have been an event in the past" and hence the only true "story" of Easter is one that unfolds into the future (Sawicki, 1994, pp. 334-335). This point becomes clearer if one compares it to the "creation story" of Genesis, where a narrative that is ostensibly about beginnings is actually not so much "protology" (an explanation of origins) as eschatology (a picture of what humanity will be when it freely, fully, and finally surrenders to God). Similarly, Easter is not a Christian "protology" (a story about our origins in the historical past) but a Christian eschatology. It tells us not where humanity has been, but where it's going. Easter explodes all the structures that bind and restrict human availability. Jesus is now available not through stories of the past but through

empowering activity in the present that propels us toward an open-ended future.

As Sawicki points out, sacramental liturgy (especially Eucharist)

> is the means of crossing the eschatological frontier. It overcomes the opposition between what is Jesus' and what is not. Sacramental liturgy is the means of assimilating to Jesus many persons, communities, and even material elements that, according to our accustomed narrative time line, could not possibly have supported any such connection.
>
> Resurrection, then, is "about" the availability of Jesus as Risen Lord in the activities of caring for the poor and celebrating the liturgy. (1994, p. 335)

In sum, liturgy (understood as both cult and care) is the place where the gap between event and text (event and story) is overcome. Precisely because Easter—as event—remains outside of any text (i.e., cannot be reduced to a story about the past), it can become the authorized interpreter of reality. The Emmaus story in Luke 24 is a case in point. There, the dejected disciples remain clueless—the Scriptural texts remain closed and unintelligible to them, and they fail to see what is plain and evident. But since the risen Jesus, as God's Word, is not simply a story (i.e., does not belong to the past), he can become the authorized interpreter, the one who opens the eyes of the disciples and so can become known to them in the breaking of bread—an action that belongs not to the past but to the present and its open-ended possibilities (to eat is to prolong life, to extend it into the future). Thus Marion concludes, "The theologian must go beyond the text to the Word, interpreting it from the point of view of the Word" (1991, p. 149).

4. Now we are in a better position to grasp just how "impossible" theology becomes possible, in Marion's view. Theology becomes possible only when its hermeneutic is Eucharist. Or to put it in a slightly different way, Eucharist makes theology possible. Think once more of the Emmaus story. In this narrative, Marion notes "Eucharist accomplishes, as its central moment, the hermeneutic.... It alone allows the text to pass to its referent, recognized as the nontextual Word of the words" (1991, p. 150). That is to say, Eucharist keeps Easter eschatological; Eucharist prevents Easter from becoming simply another narrative about the past. Marion states:

> The Word intervenes in person in the Eucharist...to accomplish in this way the hermeneutic; the hermeneutic culminates in the Eucharist; the one assures the other its condition of possibility; the intervention in person of the referent of the text [Christ is the referent being referred to here] as center of its meaning.... If the Word intervenes in person only at the Eucharistic moment, the hermeneutic (hence fundamental theology) will take place, will have its place, only in the Eucharist...[Hence,] the theologian secures the

> place of his hermeneutic...only in the Eucharist, where the Word in person, silently, speaks and blesses, speaks to the extent that he blesses. (1991, pp. 150-151)

In Eucharist, therefore, the referent, the interpreter, and the interpretation coincide in the person of the risen Christ, God's Word—just as, in point 1 above, Marion argues that speaker, speech (word), and reference (meaning)—all three—coincide in the person of the Word. A similar coincidence lies at the heart of Pickstock's work. In her preface to *After Writing,* Pickstock writes that doxology (ritual, the "embodied speech" of prayer, praise, and worship) permits

> a co-primacy of sign and body...[This] coincidence of sign and body is most manifest in the event of the Eucharist. Moreover, this event, by giving death as life, also overcomes the opposition of death to life....
>
> Not only is the Eucharist...an example of the coincidence of sign and body, death and life. It is...only a realistic construal of the event of the Eucharist [that] allows us to ground a view of language which does not evacuate the body, and does not give way to necrophilia.... Eucharist...grounds meaningful language as such. Indeed, I suggest that liturgical language is the only language that really makes sense. [This book] builds to a conclusion which asserts that the event of transubstantiation in the Eucharist is the condition of possibility for all human meaning. (1998, p. xv)

Here Pickstock echoes the position articulated by Jean-Luc Marion (and, in slightly different terms, by Sawicki):

> The Christian assembly that celebrates the Eucharist unceasingly reproduces this hermeneutic site of theology.... It hears the text, verbally passes through it in the direction of the referent Word, because the carnal Word comes to the community, and the community into him. The community therefore interprets the text in view of its referent [Christ] only to the strict degree that it lets itself be called together and assimilated, hence converted and interpreted by the Word, sacramentally and therefore actually. (1991, p. 152)

5. Two consequences flow from Marion's analysis of how impossible theology becomes possible precisely when it becomes Eucharistic. The first is this: In sacramental liturgy (especially Eucharist), the Word becomes boundless, inexhaustible. The Word (as text) is no longer the possession of those who produced it. It becomes, instead, the speech of the Word himself who (precisely as the Risen One) cannot be confined to story, cannot be bound to the past. Hence, as Marion suggests, "a sort of infinite text is composed," an "infinite surplus of meaning" that can never be plumbed or exhausted, and hence demands "an infinity of interpretations" (1991, p. 156). "This endless fecundity," Marion goes on to say, "depends on the power of

the Spirit that gives rise to the Eucharistic attitudes" (1991, p. 157) embodied in a celebrating assembly. For

> a theology is celebrated before it is written—because "before all things, and particularly before theology, one must begin by prayer."...Hence an infinity of Eucharists, celebrated by an infinity of different communities, each of which leads a fragment of the words back to the Word.... (1991, p. 157)

The second consequence is this: In a community of faith (such as the Roman Catholic Church), theology progresses eucharistically. Gathered around the Lord's table, the Sunday assembly is itself the site of theologia prima; for doxology is the essential source of doctrine. As Marion remarks,

> Theology cannot aim at any other progress than its own conversion to the Word, the theologian...becoming bishop or else one of the poor believers, in the common Eucharist...Theological progress [is] less an...ambiguous and sterile groping than the absolutely infinite unfolding of possibilities already realized in the Word but not yet in us and our words...We are infinitely free in theology: we find all already given, gained, available. It only remains to understand, to say, and to celebrate. So much freedom frightens us, deservedly. (1991, p. 158)

Thus the impossibility of theology is negotiated (indeed, negated) by the Eucharistic assembly's ritual deeds and symbols. But this progress that Marion speaks of does not proceed in a perfectly linear, ever-rising path. For at one level, liturgy itself is forever impossible. "Liturgy," writes Pickstock,

> is at once a gift from God and a sacrifice to God, a reciprocal exchange which shatters all ordinary positions of agency and reception.... Moreover, liturgical expression is made impossible by the breach which occurred at the Fall. This breach is the site of an apparent aporia, for it renders the human subject incapable of doxology, and yet, the human subject is constituted (or fully central to itself) only in the dispossessing act of praise. (1998, pp. 176-177)

Earlier, I suggested that the work of Marion and Sawicki show us how sacramental liturgy (understood as both cult and care) can help overcome the gap between event and text. As this essay comes to a conclusion, I want to show how Pickstock's work may help close the gap between liturgy understood, on the one hand, as impossible, and on the other, as essential to the constitution of the human subject.

For Pickstock, God's being and action—revealed in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus—constitute a mind-boggling impossibility, a kind of divine madness. Yet God's folly is "wiser than human wisdom, and the weakness of God is stronger than human strength" (1 Cor. 1:23-25). As Pickstock

observes, the Christian Creed (and Paul's short summary of it in 1 Corinthians) confronts us with "the insane figure of God incarnate [as]...the wisdom which [remains inscrutable, which] cannot be understood by empirical or logical investigation, Christ made man, but seen by men as a madman" (1994, p. 337).

In the institution narrative of the Eucharistic Prayer, Pickstock argues, "the world is made to abase itself before this madness" (1994, p. 336). How so? The words of Jesus inserted into the Eucharistic prayer are basically "asyndetic"; they appear almost out of nowhere, with little preparation and with barely any connection to what precedes and follows. (The term *asyndetic* in modern rhetoric designates speech that resists the use of conjunctions, cross-references, or relative and subordinate clauses.) After all, Jesus' words are a brief quotation, an assertion dropped into the midst of a lengthy prayer spoken by somebody else (the presider). Modern liturgical texts, Pickstock complains, sometimes use this asyndetic strategy in order to impose control and rationality upon a Mystery that exceeds human cognition (though this is clearly not what is going on in the Eucharistic words of Jesus). This strategy is popular in literature, where authors use "asyndeton" (lack of conjunctions, cross-referencing) to embody and enact a sense of uprootedness, flux, disconnectedness, isolation, and estrangement.

But in the case of the institution narrative Jesus' asyndetic words—which are jarringly disconnected from what comes before and after them—have just the opposite effect. First of all, Jesus' words belong to what scholars today sometimes call "decelerated" (as opposed to accelerated) narrative. The speed of a narrative simply refers to the difference between "how much territory the text covers" and "how long it takes to cover it." The Creed, for example, is accelerated narrative because it covers a huge amount of territory (everything from creation through the eschaton) in a fairly short amount of time. The Eucharistic prayer combines both accelerated and decelerated speech. The preface and initial parts of the prayer tend to be accelerated, while the words of Jesus are decelerated: they cover a short period of time, but they do so in a much slower, much more precise, much more detailed and deliberate manner. In contrast, recall how swiftly the "memorial" (or "anamnes is") that follows the institution narrative passes over the passion, death, and resurrection of Jesus. In some cases, the deceleration is rhetorically deliberate—and is not based on any actual scriptural warrant. Thus, the old Latin canon had "Qui pridie quam pateretur, accepit panem in sanctas, ac venerabiles manus suas, et elevatis oculis in coelum ad te Deum Patrem suum omnipotentem, tibi gratias agens, benedixit, fregit, deditque discipulis suis dicens: Accipite, et manducate ex hoc omnes." In addition to creating a "hieratic atmosphere" around Jesus' words, these Latin phrases helped to slow down—to decelerate—the narrative, and thus served, as well, to heighten the difference between what came before and after in the prayer.

Second, the traditional religious language that Jesus, as a Jewish layman, would have known and used belonged to a sacral universe where each word's resonances were connected to all other contexts where the same word was used (Pickstock, 1994). Thus, in the Hebrew scriptures, references to the "blood" of the Temple sacrifices would have resonated with every other mention of blood (e.g., with the blood of Abel crying out from the earth after his death, with the blood of the first-born in Egypt, with the (just barely) averted bloodshed in the story of the sacrifice of Isaac). But Christ's use of asyndeton ("disconnected") language at the Supper broke this pattern. It freed his speech from a closed system of references that could be controlled by human thought, speech, and memory. In short, Jesus' Eucharistic words broke with the "rationality" of the world—including the religious world of which Jesus himself was a part.

That is why Jesus' words are, in Pickstock's analysis, an example of "divine madness." They break both with human rationality and with the conventional religious speech of his time. The words of Jesus thus become, in a very real sense, timeless, boundless, unrestricted by temporal convention, released from all connection with the ordinary world of thought, analysis, and measurement. In short, Jesus' words are those of a madman. "This is my body which is given for you...This is my blood which is shed for you." To a rationalist, such assertions are mad—hallucinatory gibberish. One can thus understand why, in John's Gospel, the reaction to Jesus' "bread of life" discourse is doubt, dismay, even disgust. "Christ's use of asyndeton at the Last Supper," Pickstock writes, "is a reminder in every liturgical performance that human reason is incomplete, and that the work of praise is never finished" (1994, p. 335). She goes on to expand this point a bit further:

> The insanity of the Cross, the non-sense of sacrifice, was a wisdom which drowned in the "rationality" of the world, and revealed there its non-sense. By the asyndetic silence which binds his anamnetic utterances at the Last Supper, his speech opens a void, an arena of emptiness (fuller than fullness) which no words can "explain," for it is a mystery that can only be performed, received, and then repeated. These lacunae provoke a breach between human "rationality" and divine wisdom, where only God...can discern the "reason" in the non-sense. (1994, p. 335)

The Eucharistic actions of Christians—like the Eucharistic words of Jesus—are, therefore, profoundly countercultural; they assault the world's rationality. They affirm (as Pickstock insists) that to be is to worship, that human existence is inescapably doxological; at the same time, they disclose that worship is in some sense forever impossible, and that God's wisdom revealed in Christ is divine madness. Doxology, Pickstock concludes, is "ontologically constitutive"; it is what makes our existence as human subjects possible. That is why one cannot deny or erase the personal subject even

(or especially) in the impossible act of worship—"for without the liturgy, there is no subject, and the ultimate and holy expression of humility is that which voices its desire to be a subject, which is to be one with God" (1998, p. 196). Quite simply, we become (i.e., "come to") ourselves only in the act of praising God. This truth is embodied in our very speech, for language itself, as Plato knew, has a "doxological character" and is "ultimately concerned with praise of the divine" (Pickstock, 1998, p. 37).

Our contemporary "information culture," Pickstock argues, resists this doxological understanding of human beings and human speech. It prefers, instead, to regard language as "an instrument of control" wielded by a "detached, 'spiritualized' human self"—a kind of atemporal, disembodied, anerotic cipher (1998, p. xiii). As most Catholic educators know, such modernist views of self and speech are at odds with the earliest traditions of Western thought and philosophy. Vision, Pickstock notes, was central in Plato's dialogues (in the Phaedrus, for example) "because of its crucial role in the process of recognition of the good" (1998, p. 32). But such vision does not arise within an utterly autonomous, hermetically closed subject, for the "Socratic gaze" is nonviolent, reverential, open to receive and release. It is "a gaze which receives into itself that which offers itself to be recognized;...[it] is subordinate to that upon which it gazes, which is the good" (1998, p. 32). This kind of seeing does not seek to control, dominate, master or manipulate. Rather, it is "received (as happiness) by the lover in his act of passing it on,...for eros is, by definition, an interpersonal flow"; hence, the "erotic gaze institutes an ontologically constitutive loss of self, a redemptive return of that which one loves above all but is willing to give away: the very antithesis of capital" (1998, p. 32). One is reminded here of Jesus' warning that a person cannot preserve life by amassing "capital" (psychological or fiscal)—but only by giving the self away.

CONCLUSION

I began this essay by invoking the ghost of Wallace Stevens, the poet who himself, in an early poem, calls the notion of God "Plato's ghost...Aristotle's skeleton...a coolness, a vermilioned nothingness." When Stevens asks, in "Sunday Morning," whether transcendence is possible—or necessary—he was asking, in effect, whether worship is possible. Marion and Pickstock affirm that it is—but only on condition that we surrender to the folly of God's wisdom and to the madness of Jesus' Eucharistic words and deeds. To invite people to Eucharist is, in short, to invite them to an existence that is recognized and received as gift—an existence that questions, radically, the rationality of the world. To say this is not to suggest that Christians are locked in an unwinnable "contest of meanings" with the world. For Christian ritual, as Talal Asad has argued, is not a symbol system aimed at producing "mean-

ings" but a technology—an acquired aptitude or embodied skill—aimed at the production of a "virtuous self" (i.e., of a person who is loving, compassionate, truthful, humble, hospitable, and wise). In short, doxology (*lex orandi*) is not only the source of doctrine (*lex credendi*), it is also the source of ethics (*lex agendi*). Ultimately, what is at stake in Christian Eucharist is not merely what we believe but how our belief shapes our behavior—how it generates moral vision, character, and hence, "identity." After all, the same Jesus who said, "This is my body given for you, my blood shed for you" also said, "Amen I say to you, whatever you did for one of these least of mine, you did for me" (Mt 25:40).

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