

## SACRAMENTAL-LITURGICAL THEOLOGY SINCE VATICAN II: THE DIALECTIC OF MEANING AND PERFORMANCE

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### PART ONE: A HALF-CENTURY'S REVIEW

With apologies for such a prosaic entrée to my presentation this evening, I wish to begin by commenting on its title—specifically, first, on my placing the *dialectic* at the center of the title for the opening plenary address of an annual meeting thematically focused on *Sacrament(s)*. If you would allow me a bit of conjecture, I could imagine that in the period surrounding the Second Vatican Council—say, the 1950s through early 1970s—theologians might well have mused over the joining of sacrament and dialectic as a sort of category mistake. After all, had not the methodological boundary lines among classroom theologians achieved a certain fixity opposing dialectical thought to sacramental and/or analogical imagination? While such sophisticated analysis of the two paradigms' paragons, Barth and Rahner, as performed by David Tracy<sup>1</sup> would come to find more in common between each Karl's utterly modern project than seemed evident to their average readers, still, conventional thought among American Catholic theologians and popular writers has asserted the analogical or sacramental imagination as a defining characteristic of Catholic thought and practice.<sup>2</sup>

But that reference to practice leads to a second comment about my title for a presentation whose charge is to assess, at least in this American context, the state of the sacramental-theological question fifty years after the beginning of Vatican II. For there has been a dialectical tension concerning the subject matter of sacrament itself within the American Catholic theological academy during the past five decades. Put bluntly, although it now is a waning phenomenon in this new century, over the better part of the period after Vatican II systematic theologians, perhaps more on doctoral faculties, tended to consider liturgical theology an inferior intellectual enterprise, at times even to the point of scorn.

There, I've said it! And I say it as one whose academic-theological career earlier found itself in the crosshairs of such attitudes, sometimes articulated, other times thinly veiled. The tension—perhaps dialectical—has been primarily due to systematic theologians' pride in pursuing pure thought, doctrine founded upon argument (rather than mystery), *fides quaerens intellectum*, but a faith identified first and foremost with concepts. In the late 1970s Johann Baptist Metz attacked this notion of faith as an idea, as some transcendental apperception, countering that faith is fundamentally praxis, a praxis of mysticism and ethics whose irreducible elements of memory, narrative, and solidarity comprise the contours of a "practical fundamental theology."<sup>3</sup> Still, among systematic theologians, not only much of the old guard but now, I fear,

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<sup>1</sup> See David Tracy, *The Analogical Imagination: Christian Theology and the Culture of Pluralism* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 107, 412, 416–18.

<sup>2</sup> See Richard P. McBrien, *Catholicism*, rev. ed. (New York: HarperCollins, 1994), 15–17, 1196–1200; Michael J. Himes, "Finding God in All Things': A Sacramental Worldview and Its Effects," in *As Leaven in the World: Catholic Perspectives on Faith, Vocations, and the Intellectual Life*, ed. Thomas M. Landy (Franklin, WI: Sheed and Ward, 2001), 91–92, 99–101; and Andrew M. Greeley, *The Catholic Imagination* (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 1–22.

<sup>3</sup> "The universality of the offer of salvation in Christianity does not have the character of a transcendental concept of universality or a concept drawn out from universal history... In christological

even some of the new, political and liberation theologies' goal that praxis-thinking fundamentally pervade academic theology found an uneven reception.<sup>4</sup> Rather, Metz's work, for example, largely stands as another concept to study, another method, among others, to consider, perhaps for which to be responsible on a doctoral comprehensive reading list. While the reasons for this resistance to prioritizing praxis in thought no doubt rest in ideological causes situated in each of theology's three publics—academy, church, and society<sup>5</sup>—my task here, of course, is to address what about sacraments seemed (perhaps still seems) so threatening to “real” or “serious” systematic theology.

It would not seem too risky to suggest that one of the primary reasons the subject matter of sacraments and liturgy would strike the men who received their theological doctorates in the 1950s through 70s as minimally worthy of concerted theological discipline was the fact that in their seminary training the sacraments were the subject of canon law, with some further Thomistic treatment through the tenets of transubstantiation, matter and form, in a doctrinal theology course.<sup>6</sup> Sacraments were effectively a matter of practical power, that is, clerical power, which bore with it the responsibility for teaching their validity, whether in catechetical or apologetic context.<sup>7</sup> The rites themselves, on the other hand and in practical detail, comprised the domain of liturgists characteristically consumed with rubrics, often combining legal precision with imposed aesthetics, such that the old joke about the difference between a liturgist and a terrorist could persist at least into my own time in the 1990s.<sup>8</sup>

Be that as it may, the methodological tension over the relevance, if not necessity, of actual (ritual) practice to academic theology even persisted among those specializing in sacraments. The experiential turn in American Catholic sacramental theology took its cues from

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terms this means that the salvation ‘for everyone’ that is grounded in Christ does not become universal by means of an idea, but by means of the intelligible power of a praxis: the praxis of discipleship. This intelligibility of Christianity cannot be conveyed in a purely speculative way, but narratively.” Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, rev. trans. J. Matthew Ashley (New York: Crossroad, 2007 [German original, 1977]), 28–30, 71–74, 84; and Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 74–75, 189–91.

<sup>4</sup> Thus, Gustavo Gutiérrez writes, “the theology of liberation proposes for us not so much a new theme for reflection as a *new way to do theology*,” *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation*, trans., Sr. Caridad Inda and John Eagleson, rev. ed. (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1988 [orig. pub., 1973]), 12.

<sup>5</sup> On these “Three Publics of Theology,” see Tracy, 3–28.

<sup>6</sup> French pastoral theologian Philippe Barras articulates the outcome of such seminary training by distinguishing between “a ‘nonliturgical’ sacramental praxis, understood as a deployment of a catechetical arsenal on the occasion of sacramental administration, and a sacramental pastoral praxis that as a part of the pastoral liturgy has for its objective to open and inscribe the way of Christian existence in its relationship to God, initiated or marked by the event that constitutes the liturgical celebration of the sacrament” (“Sacramental Theology at the Mercy of Pastoral Service,” in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, ed. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill, S.J. [Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2008], 89).

<sup>7</sup> During this very time period, on the other hand, as James F. White recounts, began “the intentional training of liturgy professors for seminaries,” first at the Institut Catholique de Paris in the 1950s, and then the Sant’ Anselmo in Rome and Notre Dame in the USA in the 1960s (“Forum: Lessons in Liturgical Pedagogy,” *Worship* 68:5 [1994]: 438–50, at 439).

<sup>8</sup> For the younger audience and the otherwise uninitiated: “What’s the difference between a terrorist and a liturgist? With a terrorist you can at least negotiate sometimes.”

the early Schillebeeckx and consistent Rahner, focusing phenomenologically on human-developmental qualities of encounter and event but still not attending closely to ritual texts and dynamics. In a 1984 issue of the journal *Worship*, liturgical theologian John Baldovin concluded his appreciative review of two then-newly-published books on the sacraments, including Bernard Cooke's still widely read *Sacraments & Sacramentality*, as follows:

My fundamental criticism of both books will not seem strange coming from a student of the liturgy. I was unable to find in either text a single quotation or reference to the reformed rites of the Roman Catholic Church or to their general instructions or *praenotanda*. Until sacramental theology begins to take the actual celebration of the sacraments seriously as a starting point it will be guilty of the accusation leveled by Louis Boyer against eucharistic theology twenty years ago: here we have theologies about the sacraments, not theologies of the sacraments.<sup>9</sup>

If sacramental theology as a systematic effort was predominantly phenomenological in pursuing how and why sacraments are anthropologically basic and ecclesologically essential,<sup>10</sup> liturgical theology addressed the rites largely through historical and textual work. In a 1994 essay Methodist liturgical scholar James White noted that of the fifty-four doctoral degrees the liturgical studies program at Notre Dame had produced since its founding in 1966, all but five were "historical in subject matter."<sup>11</sup> White's comments point to two distinctions about twentieth-century liturgical studies, in general contrast to Catholic sacramental theology, namely, its ecumenical commitments and text-centered historical work.

Those salient features of liturgical theology had some methodological problems of their own. The laudable ecumenical impulses of liturgical scholars across the gamut of Western mainstream denominations, all of whom held the Second Vatican Council's Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy as their charter document,<sup>12</sup> often consorted with the modern tendency to

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<sup>9</sup> John F. Baldovin, review of *Sacraments & Sacramentality*, by Bernard Cooke, and *Introduction to the Sacraments*, by John P. Shanz, *Worship* 58:6 (1984): 549–51. In the closing paragraph of his preface to the book's second edition, Cooke offers: "For a time I played with the idea of a much lengthier revision, one that would treat at greater length the various sacramental liturgies. However, I rejected this approach because I did not want to distract from the main purpose of this book: to draw attention to the *basic sacramentality of Christian life* that grounds the meaning and effectiveness of the liturgical rituals. Understanding, appreciating, and living out this sacramentality is, I believe, the most important element in the development of Christian spirituality" (*Sacraments & Sacramentality*, rev. ed. [Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1994], vi).

<sup>10</sup> Another systematic project, this time based on a Lonerganian concept of conversion, was Donald Gelpi's two-volume *Committed Worship: A Sacramental Theology for Converting Christians* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1993), for which Notre Dame liturgical historian Maxwell E. Johnson opened his review thus: "a largely successful attempt to articulate a 'foundational theology' of conversion in relation to the current Roman Catholic reformed rites of the seven sacraments. Readers expecting a historical-critical treatment of sacramental theology or a detailed theological analysis of the texts of the current rites, however, should be forewarned." Further down, Johnson avers: "My major problem with this work does not center on his theology of conversion *per se* but on the application of this theology as necessarily foundational to the sacraments themselves in the remaining sections [of the two volumes]" (*Worship* 68:5 [1994]: 465–66).

<sup>11</sup> White, "Forum," 443.

<sup>12</sup> "[The] *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*... acted as an instant catalyst in sparking unprecedented liturgical experimentation and revision throughout Anglicanism and in most major

construct a master narrative based on the myth of some indubitable historical origin. With sincere, if not passionate pastoral agendas, and often as the officially deputed authors of the revised rites for their respective ecclesial communions, liturgical scholars sought common, normative grounds in the primordial content and forms of Christians rites, pursued through quests for the *Urtext* of each liturgical unit. In this, as in every case, history was hermeneutics; liturgists interpreted texts to support arguments for how liturgical and sacramental rites should now be constructed so as to generate genuine renewal within and among Christian communities. By the turn of the twenty-first century, Notre Dame professor and prominent Anglican scholar of early Christian liturgy Paul Bradshaw called to account all those colleagues who had been “lumping” ancient sources into single normative patterns for grossly ignoring the constant, significant differences of detail in the texts.<sup>13</sup> There persisted a troubling phenomenon; too often, if not so much in print as in local practice, liturgists justified whatever contemporary pastoral applications they so desired by a kind of historical snobbery, thus advancing not only the liturgical terrorist syndrome but also the charge from systematic theologians, again not in print but in conversations at conferences (I can attest), that the liturgists lacked the philosophical firepower to justify their normative claims.

Lest I paint a too polemical picture, however, I should acknowledge that certainly by the 1980s the better systematic theologians had come to embrace historical studies as essential to crafting rearticulations of the faith adequate to contemporary circumstances. On the topic of sacraments that methodological shift was evident in Bernard Cooke’s monumental work on ministry, for which the straightforward subtitle was simply, *History and Theology*.<sup>14</sup> During the remaining two decades of the twentieth century David Power produced several books on liturgy and sacraments that integrated history and hermeneutics so as to construct systematic arguments for what renewed ecclesial practice could be in late-modern and globalized contexts.<sup>15</sup> Meanwhile, his Catholic University colleague Mary Collins had already produced a number of compelling articles using anthropology and ritual theories not only to substantiate constructive proposals but also to deconstruct the clerical power retarding truly inculturated, liberating reforms in sacramental celebration. Her 1979 essay on the history of and ideology entailed in official restrictions on the making and handling of the eucharistic bread remains a tour de force both in content and methodology.<sup>16</sup> Other notable women’s contributions line up rather more along the systematic and liturgical theological divide. Susan Ross’s 2001 *Extravagant Affections* integrated systematic, psychoanalytic, and ethical theories to craft an enduring and ecumenically

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Protestant churches” (Bryan D. Spinks, “Anglicans and Dissenters,” in *The Oxford History of Christian Worship*, ed. Geoffrey Wainwright and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker [New York: Oxford University, 2006], 526). See also in the same volume, Hans-Christoph Schmidt-Lauber, “The Lutheran Tradition in the German Lands,” 396, 415; and Karen B. Westerfield Tucker, “North America,” 625–26.

<sup>13</sup> See Paul F. Bradshaw, *The Search for the Origins of Christian Worship: Sources and Methods for the Study of Early Liturgy*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (New York: Oxford University, 2002), 6–20.

<sup>14</sup> See Bernard Cooke, *Ministry to Word and Sacrament: History and Theology* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1976/1980).

<sup>15</sup> See David N. Power, *Unsearchable Riches: The Symbolic Nature of Liturgy* (New York: Pueblo Books, 1984); *The Sacrifice We Offer: The Tridentine Dogma and Its Reinterpretation* (New York: Crossroad, 1987); *The Eucharistic Mystery: Revitalizing the Tradition* (New York: Crossroad, 1992); and *Sacrament: The Language of God’s Giving* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

<sup>16</sup> See Mary Collins, “Critical Questions for Liturgical Theology,” *Worship* 53 (1979): 302–17; reprinted in, Mary Collins, O.S.B., *Worship: Renewal to Practice* (Washington: Pastoral Press, 1987), 115–32.

influential feminist sacramental theology,<sup>17</sup> while Teresa Berger's contributions have come through more historical and liturgical study, with a disarming attentiveness to not only women's but also wider popular religious and devotional experiences.<sup>18</sup>

Power and Collins, as well as Margaret Kelleher, Edward Kilmartin, and Robert Daly (with apologies for my leaving others out) were active leaders of seminars and ongoing work groups in both the North American Academy of Liturgy and the Catholic Theological Society of America. Through their productive and creative scholarship, the regular session they organized at the annual CTSA meeting by the 1990s was called the "Sacramental and Liturgical Theology Group," a title indicating the felicitous convergence that the dialectics of theory and practice in the two decreasingly polarized sub-disciplines were attaining. The doctrinal principle from Vatican II<sup>19</sup> common to sacramental and liturgical theologies (European and American) was the abandonment of scholasticism's treatment of sacraments as following from a Christology of incarnation in favor of situating the church's sacramental rites in the paschal mystery, a concept biblically and patristically rooted in theological reflection on the church's ritual celebrations of the mystery of faith. This tradition of reflection came through two lines of development: one emphasizing the sacraments as participation in the definitive salvific event of Jesus' death and resurrection; the other emphasizing sacraments as immersing believers in the work of salvation Christ's death and resurrection continues to realize in their lives and, ultimately, for the life of the world.

Still to be overcome, nonetheless, or at least ever vigilantly checked, in sacramental-liturgical theology is the pernicious problem of textual positivism. From its inception circa 1870, liturgical theology tended to be a study of ritual books—their orations, rubrics, and commentaries—with an often misguided presumption that an analysis of the texts reveals not only the meaning of the rites in themselves but the impact they had on those who celebrated them. While that impressive corpus of work has undeniably been fruitful, its text-bound methods have proven ultimately insufficient. The unfortunate corollary to this mindset has been the naïve conviction that contemporary liturgical renewal is a matter of getting the words of texts exactly correct, with the expectation that the clergy's pronouncing them and the people's hearing them will somehow automatically, intellectually instill a proper theology, even a practical one at that.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Jewish liturgical theologian Lawrence Hoffman in 1987 and, learning from him, Monsignor Kevin Irwin in 1994 made significant contributions by writing books arguing for how context shapes text, and vice versa.<sup>21</sup> Meanwhile, in 1990 Bernard Cooke, in *The Distancing of God*, attempted a survey of Christian symbol broadly conceived through the major epochs of Christian history so as to argue for how the primordial Christian encounter with the risen Christ

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<sup>17</sup> See Susan A. Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 2001).

<sup>18</sup> See Teresa Berger, *Women's Ways of Worship: Gender Analysis and Liturgical History* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1999); *Gender Differences and the Making of Liturgical History* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2011); and numerous articles in such journals as *Studia Liturgica* and *Worship*.

<sup>19</sup> See *Sacrosanctum concilium*, no. 5.

<sup>20</sup> In his prodigious and detailed work (numbering more than 600 essays and some 20 books) the eminent Jesuit liturgical historian Robert F. Taft has never tired of pointing out the foolishness in anachronistically approaching texts, while often skewering the ideological biases of those so inclined.

<sup>21</sup> See Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text: A Holistic Approach to Liturgy* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1987); and Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1994).



had been impeded by ecclesial, philosophical, and ritual structures while raising counter examples of popular religious movements and literary works he argued promoted Christians' recognition of the triune God's presence and action in their lives.<sup>22</sup> Cooke's method attended to an impressive range of literature replete with suggestive insights, yet his remaining inattentiveness to liturgical details and his sweeping systematic-philosophical assumptions left that work open to criticism from various angles.

More attentive to context *and* liturgical text were David Power, in his aforementioned books, and Nathan Mitchell in his bimonthly "Amen Corner" in the journal *Worship*. Power proved intrepid in his attention to the mutual influence of ecclesial and social cultures upon the medieval and then counter-reformation sacramental rites and theologies so as to argue for contemporary theology's need to recover critically the biblical, narrative content of the faith amidst what he unflinchingly described as the "ruins" of a post-Tridentine piety and theology now impotent amidst the likewise ruined promises of modernity.<sup>23</sup> Mitchell's continuing analysis of whatever liturgical documents, practices, and spirituality he considers relevant or even pressing in a given installment of his bimonthly column always consider the changing social and personal-subjective conditions of postmodernity, approaching the material with an open mind while turning an iconoclastic eye on official Roman Catholic liturgical regulations, practices, and theologies. A distinctive influence on both men's work is Louis-Marie Chauvet, who during his several decades as a fundamental theologian at the Institut Catholique de Paris produced what is arguably the most influential book in sacramental-liturgical theology since the early contributions of Rahner and Schillebeeckx. Chauvet continues to add to the scores of articles he has published, primarily in the thrice-yearly *La Maison-Dieu*, addressing each and all of the rites in pastoral-liturgical detail.

The French original of Chauvet's magnum opus, *Symbol and Sacrament*, came out in 1987, coincidentally the same year as Hoffman's *Beyond the Text*, while the American-English translation appeared, likewise coincidentally, a year after Irwin's *Context and Text*.<sup>24</sup> Chauvet's sacramental theology, while regularly attentive to historical texts and practices, is a philosophical interpretation of how God's having taken up and saved the human condition in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus becomes real in the lives of those baptized into that same paschal mystery.<sup>25</sup> The Church's symbolic order of Scripture, sacrament, and ethics makes of the human subject's historically and culturally mediated project of knowledge, gratitude, and ethics a sacrament—an embodied revelation—of the reign of God, the salvation of human beings. What keeps this way of life explicitly Christian is ongoing balance between these three constitutive poles of the practice of faith. Only by submitting to the resistance of reality revealed in each dimension's juxtaposition to the others do believers continue to give themselves over to the otherness, the presence-in-absence of the God of Jesus. At the heart of Chauvet's fundamental sacramental theology is his insistence that the sacraments of the Church are practices of *faith*,

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<sup>22</sup> See Bernard J. Cooke, *The Distancing of God: The Ambiguity of Symbol in History and Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1990).

<sup>23</sup> See Power, *The Eucharistic Mystery*, vii, 13; and *Sacrament*, 18.

<sup>24</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, S.J., and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1995).

<sup>25</sup> My rehearsal of Chauvet's theology in this and the next paragraph I take directly from my overview of his work in my part of the Introduction to *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, ed. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill, S.J. (See above, n. 6), xvi, and xxi–xxii.

with faith being “the assent to a loss,”<sup>26</sup> a continuous letting go of our projections of what we imagine God should be like, so that the totally other yet lovingly near God revealed in the crucified and resurrected Christ might really be present to us in our lived experience.

The corporality of the practice of the sacraments, precisely as language-laden, communal acts of symbolic mediation, is what makes their celebration so essential to knowing and living the Christ proclaimed in Scripture. Participation in sacramental liturgy as an ecclesial body given over to both the Word in Scripture and symbolic gestures that inscribe that divine word on our persons delivers us from the human tendency to imagine that there should be no distance, no gap, no otherness between ourselves and the fullness of God. The members of a liturgical assembly bring precisely their bodies to the celebration, their daily action (ethics) as persons engaged in the social and cosmic bodiliness of the human story being written in history. By participating in the traditional body of the Church’s sacramental worship we submit to the mystery of God revealed in the crucified and resurrected Jesus, a God who comes to us in and through the shared bodily medium of our human knowing, suffering, and loving. Thus does the God of Jesus become really present to our lives, even as that sacramental ecclesial presence always recedes in its coming, sending us in the Spirit to discover the Word as living and active in us and our world.

Chauvet thus pressed for sacraments as presence of the absent one, of faith as an assent to a loss (*un manque*, a lack), opening the necessity of mediation in all its human bodily complexity—natural, social, traditional. Systematic theologian Jean-Louis Souletie has provided an assessment of the necessity for theology’s greater engagement with the social sciences that follows from Chauvet’s original contribution:

The status of truth changes in this approach. If truth always exceeds the discourse that one has about it, it seemed to Chauvet that it should verify itself through the passage of these long mediations by which the human comes about. The theological task is obvious. Ritual mediation is not an anecdote. It gives access to the truth of faith and participates in the construction of the believing subject in its linguistic, material, psychic and political ambiguities. The social sciences have no other ambition here than to eradicate illusions of immediacy, which lodge themselves in these corporal mediations where the human and believer become. But positively they will help sacramental theology to think about itself further in the register of grace understood as ‘God who makes profitable the symbolic field that is the believing subject.’<sup>27</sup>

Souletie notes criticisms of Chauvet on the question of whether the anthropological priority of the symbolic comes at the cost of the proper theological efficacy of the sacramental,<sup>28</sup> a concern resonant with Power’s questioning earlier whether Chauvet’s dismissal of ontology and reliance on gift-exchange theory is theologically sufficient to counter the mythical language of sacrifice

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<sup>26</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2001), 39.

<sup>27</sup> Jean-Louis Souletie, “The Social Sciences and Christian Theology After Chauvet,” in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God* (see above, n. 6), 195. Souletie quotes Chauvet, “Quand la théologie rencontre les sciences humaines,” in *La responsabilité des théologiens. Mélanges offerts à Mgr. J. Doré*, ed. F. Bousquet, et.al. (Paris: Desclée, 2002), 408.

<sup>28</sup> See *Ibid.*, 195–96.

that continues to distort theologies and practices of the Eucharist.<sup>29</sup> Given the contested and, indeed, declining state of active membership and regular liturgical participation in early 21<sup>st</sup>-century American Catholicism, however, my own concerns are less with the metaphysical and more in league with Chauvet's fundamental practical agenda prioritizing pastoral efficacy over clerical-hierarchical-institutional security in the still-unrealized reform and renewal of sacraments and liturgy. What Souletie and Chauvet call social science I shall now in a shorter second part of this presentation enlist in the burgeoning genres of ritual theory and performance studies as resources for more adequately accessing in actual, contextual liturgical practices the dialectics of meaning and performance in American Catholic rites today.

## **PART TWO: A CONSTRUCTIVE WAY FORWARD**

Did you note what Souletie had to say about truth? His assertion that the status of truth changes in a theology that locates truth in the actual existence of Christian corporal and corporate practices of word, sacrament, and ethics, that situates truth in a church who in its members knows how permeable are its boundaries in a world that ultimately belongs to God, cannot but have devastating implications for those who equate the understanding of faith with totalizing control over bodies—bodies of knowledge, bodies at worship, bodies that love and sin. The symbolic-sacramental relocation of truth in a faith practiced and known in history and society pulls at the base of hierarchical ladders propped up inside defensive walls academic and clerical, transcendently idealist and ecclesially triumphalist. Seeking the truth theologically in “the long mediations” of ritualized and ethical bodies—which, of course, in all their ambiguities are the only human bodies we have or can know—methodologically requires constant narrative descriptions and rigorous intellectual analyses if sacramental-liturgical theology is to contribute to not only the academy but also church and society in what can only be described as a time of crisis at the interface of those three publics for 21<sup>st</sup>-century Catholicism. Sacramental-liturgical theology can make its proper, original contribution at this moment, I propose, precisely by “eradicating illusions of immediacy” with the help of such social-scientific disciplines as ritual and performance studies. To do so requires no small measure of courage, for it is to go against the grain of the most rigorously held (because insufficiently critical) assumptions of modern thought, both religious and secular. Allow me to explore and, hopefully, to explain.

Perhaps the primary reason many Catholic academics and ecclesiastical authorities have been wary or dismissive toward sacramental and/or liturgical theology is because they know, even if only subconsciously, that ritual is fluid with time and corporality, that “ritual's repeated, performative, and antidiscursive nature,” as social scientists Adam Seligman and associates argue, “provides a critical way of dealing with rather than overcoming, the eternal contradiction and ambiguity of human existence.”<sup>30</sup> Seligman and associates place *ritual* (broadly conceived) at one end of the human continuum for “framing experience, action, and understanding” while at the other end (and in ongoing tension) is what they call *sincerity*, which values individual decision and the exercise of the will, the workings of which “are singular, unique, discursive, and

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<sup>29</sup> See Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., “Les raisons pour lesquelles les Américains apprécient Louis-Marie Chauvet,” *La Maison-Dieu* 267 (September 2011): 133–34. The discussion includes citations of Power, *Unsearchable Riches*, 180; and *The Eucharistic Mystery*, 324–25.

<sup>30</sup> Adam B. Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences: An Essay on the Limits of Sincerity* (New York: Oxford University, 2008), 129–30.



indicative to the highest degree.”<sup>31</sup> Human ritual negotiates ambiguity without completely resolving it, as would, in contrast, a discursive (that is, sincere) explanation. Indeed, the ambiguity that haunts all boundaries in life—physical, social, traditional—is the very reason for ritualizing.<sup>32</sup> Ritual is the way we humans hold the many irresolvable ambivalences of life in a *both-and* tension that orients and, with repetition, reorients a people’s identity and agency amidst the ambiguities of interpersonal, social, and cosmic relations as well as through the changes in the individual lifecycle—with death always looming around the edges. Attention to such human activity does not lend itself well to the pursuit of certitude through pure argument in the academy, nor to apodictic assertions about the singular proper execution of a given rite and its meaning.

Perhaps, then, the ambiguity inherent to actual ritual performances as practices in particular contexts is likewise the reason for the textual positivism that so long plagued liturgical theology and, I lament to observe, persists in certain theologians’ expectations that, for example, getting the language of the Eucharistic Prayer exactly conceptually right, and then the people—clergy and laity—thoroughly educated in its meaning, is a promising theoretical (theological), and practical (pastoral) plan. This points to the fundamental error pervading a half millennium of Western Christian theologies (Protestant and Catholic) but also the whole range of modern academic thought, namely, the assumption that ritual is merely expressive of meaning, a dualistic notion totally dismissive of the bodily nature of ritual—and thus of humanity, for that matter.<sup>33</sup> To turn once again to the work of the Seligman group:

Ritual has had something of a poor reputation in the contemporary world, relegated to a form of deviance in the structural-functionalism of midcentury American sociology or extirpated as an empty, external husk, lacking in ultimate spiritual significance, or again, condemned as a form of authoritarian control and dominance. We are often too concerned with exploring the different forms of self-expression and of individual authenticity to appreciate the rhythmic structure of the shared subjunctive that is the deepest work of ritual...Once we reject the view of ritual as the nonessential husk of something else that is ‘more’ real (the visible sign of an invisible grace, as it were), once we return to an appreciation of ritual as a language in which the medium is very much the message, we come up with something counterintuitive to most senses of Enlightenment thought and sentiment.<sup>34</sup>

In order for academic liturgical theology to provide original and constructive insight (*intellectum*) into the ritual praxis of the faith there needs to be a constant renunciation of textual positivism and an embrace of the daunting challenge of generating methodologies to account for

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 7, 118.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 41–47.

<sup>33</sup> Catherine Bell levels this critique against modern philosophical and social-scientific methodologies in terms of a privileged dichotomy of thought over action: “the differentiation tends to distort not only the nature of so-called physical activities, but the nature of mental ones as well. Yet the more subtle and far-reaching distortion is not the obvious bifurcation of a single, complex reality into dichotomous aspects that can exist in theory only. Rather, it is the far more powerful act of subordination disguised in such differentiations, the subordination of act to thought, or actors to thinkers. Indeed, no matter how provisional or heuristic, a distinction between thought and action is not a differentiation between two equally weighted terms. When used, it is rarely intended to be” (*Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* [New York: Oxford University, 1992], 48–49).

<sup>34</sup> Seligman et al., *Ritual and Its Consequences*, 10.

what is happening in the complex bodily, multivalent physical, social, and traditional dimensions of the sacraments in context.

As social theorists, Seligman and associates write out of a sense of practical concern if not urgency for our contemporary global society, arguing that modern blinders to the power exercised in the pervasive ritual activities—political, religious, commercial, interpersonal—that variably unite and divide, often violently, peoples on local, national, and international scales prevent accessing key resources for identifying and helping scenarios of tension and conflict. For my part, I think there is much to be gained in adopting their insightful arguments for the social body that is the church. While Catholicism, with its readily identifiable sacramental-ritual system abstractly considered, may seem not to be so affected by the modern diminution of ritual in the individual subject's sincere quest for meaning, the simplistic touting of the so-called Catholic or Sacramental Imagination at this point in American history is prone to ignore the increasingly precipitous decline in levels of participation in sacramental rites the American church has been witnessing in its members for decades. While decreased regular Sunday Mass attendance has garnered attention in its recent acceleration, the fact is that the practice of the Rite of Penance collapsed in the late 1960s and has not recovered or found—better said, been *allowed* to find—a new way forward.<sup>35</sup> I continue to state the obvious in noting that the sacrament of orders (the priesthood) has likewise plunged in actual participation, but we should not ignore the startling degree to which the marked decline in marriages across the American population is no less statistically evident for Roman Catholics. These significant changes in ritual-symbolic practice are not simply due to the controlling agenda of the church hierarchy, as liberals might contend, nor simply to the decadence of techno-commercial culture, as might conservatives. No, the situation is far more complex precisely due to the fact that the liturgical rites, as ritual practices, are not simply expressive of ideas already decided and/or social roles statically set.<sup>36</sup> Cultural-anthropological help is needed for a practical-theological anthropology adequate to the demanding questions and problems, but also promise, for sacramental-liturgical praxis.

Here the highly influential work of the late Catherine Bell is pertinent. In her widely read *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, Bell summarizes what theorists argue against as they press to make the particular activity of a given ritual understandable (to use a phrase more recently coined by Don Handelman<sup>37</sup>) *in its own right*: “it is a major reversal of traditional theory to hypothesize that ritual activity is not the ‘instrument’ of more basic purposes, such as power, politics, or social control, which are usually seen as existing before or outside the activities of the rite. It puts interpretive analysis on a new footing to suggest that ritual practices are themselves the very production and negotiation of power relations.” In this alternate theoretical position

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<sup>35</sup> For the Vatican's insistence on the nature and pastoral application of the three ritual forms of the reformed Rite of Penance (1973) see, Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance* (December 2, 1984), nos. 28–34; and Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, Circular Letter *On the Integrity of the Sacrament of Penance* (March 20, 2000). Over the past few decades theologians and pastoral ministers have proffered new forms attuned to changing circumstances, such as the latter chapters in *Alternative Futures for Worship: Volume Four: Reconciliation*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1987).

<sup>36</sup> For a narrative account of one pastoral example, opening into theological analysis, see ch.2 in Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., *Encountering Christ in the Eucharist: The Paschal Mystery in People, Word, and Sacrament* (New York: Paulist, 2012), 38–45.

<sup>37</sup> See Don Handelman, “Introduction: Why Ritual in Its Own Right? How So?” in *Ritual in Its Own Right: Exploring the Dynamics of Transformation*, ed. Don Handelman and Galina Lindquist (New York: Berghahn Books, 2005), 1–32.

“ritualization as a strategic mode of practice produces nuanced relationships of power, relationships characterized by acceptance and resistance, negotiated appropriation and redemptive reinterpretation of the hegemonic order.”<sup>38</sup> The example of American Catholic sacramental ritual that readily lends itself to this line of descriptive and analytic work is the theology and practice of marriage.

If ever there were a particular ceremony in Roman Catholicism demonstrative of how ritual does not simply express or symbolize a presumed, established, univocal religious ideology (that is, theology) it is the current Rite of Marriage.<sup>39</sup> Drawing heavily on both constitutions on the church from Vatican II the Introduction to the Rite teaches marriage as a covenant between man and woman divinely instituted for the good of the human race but, moreover, sacramental of Christ’s loving relationship with the church. The couple are to each other God’s offer of salvation and working out of sanctification and, together, a gift to church and society in their loving partnership and rearing of children.<sup>40</sup> The Rite of Marriage, in its various ritual elements, serves to bring this about, that is, to actualize this union in the “virtual space,” to use Bruce Kapferer’s terminology,<sup>41</sup> that the ritual creates for the couple for reshaping their identities in relation to each other, church, and society. But precisely that terrain of ritual agency is where, to my experience as theological professor and pastoral minister, contestation arises, as American couples (and their mothers!) imagine and celebrate their weddings.

Perhaps the strongest dissonance between the Rite’s official theology and ritual and most American Catholics’ ideologies of marriage is the latter’s approach to marriage as an interpersonal affair realized in the private context of family and friends. Increasingly, then, the couple cannot understand the Roman Catholic Church’s requirement that the ritual take place in a consecrated church or oratory or why the couple’s originally composed marriage vows may neither validly nor licitly substitute for the Rite of Consent. While pastors are able and often willing to negotiate many details of the Rite, those two nonnegotiables number among several common reasons American Catholics are opting to have their weddings apart from the Catholic Church.

A further significant clash in ideology has emerged with the requirement of officially sanctioned pre-marital classes or retreats as a condition for the sacramental celebration of marriage in the Catholic Church. Young people are often incredulous at these requirements and, in their *sincere* personal agency, go about executing a wedding with some other minister or civil official—to the incredulity, in turn, of many elders and clerics who can’t believe couples can so easily consider themselves the self-authorizing executors of their marriages.

But this shows how the power inherent in marriage insofar as it is human ritualizing is diffuse and varied among its principal actors. Fundamentally ritual in nature, the Rite of Marriage primarily functions under the authorities leading the traditional body, the church, yet the laity is not without its own measure of power in performing the sacramental-liturgical event. Bell’s groundbreaking theoretical work is of further help here in her rejections of both (1) the

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<sup>38</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 196.

<sup>39</sup> For a full development of this topic, including social-anthropological and theological analysis of contextual descriptions, see Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., “Performing the Rite of Marriage: Agency, Identity, and Ideology,” *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy* 24 (2012 [forthcoming]).

<sup>40</sup> See *Rite of Marriage* (1969), nos. 1–4. See also *Lumen gentium* (1964), no. 11; and *Gaudium et spes* (1965), no. 48.

<sup>41</sup> See Bruce Kapferer, “Ritual Dynamics and Virtual Practice: Beyond Representation and Meaning.” In *Ritual in Its Own Right*, 46–48.

long-regnant modern “ideology-as-worldview perspective,” with “its ‘totalistic’ fallacy,’ the assumption that a group is dominated by a single, holistic set of ideas, which acts as the cement for [a given] society,” and (2) ideology “as dominant class interest,” which “simultaneously casts ideology as self-conscious and articulate, but also ‘false’ and able to dominate through mystification.”<sup>42</sup> The society in this case is the Roman Catholic Church in North America, and the dominant class, the local clergy, to whom the laity would be seen as the passively obliging underclass, with said clergy likewise viewed as obediently subservient to the official rites and ongoing directives issued by the Vatican hierarchy and executed by the bishops they appoint across the globe. Bell’s theory counters in this way:

Ideology is best understood as a strategy of power, a process whereby certain social practices or institutions are depicted to be ‘natural’ and ‘right.’ While such a strategy implies the existence of a group or groups whose members stand to gain in some way by an acceptance of these practices, it also implies the existence of some form of opposition. Thus, ideologization may imply an unequal distribution of power, but it also indicates a greater distribution of power than would exist in relationships defined by sheer force. It is a strategy intimately connected with legitimation, discourse, and fairly high degrees of social complicity and maneuverability.<sup>43</sup>

The “natural” and “right” for the clergy and liturgists responsible for marriage as a sacramental rite of the church entails a sincere commitment to the official ritual and canon law that, at the extreme, can take the form of totalizing control. But in most cases these ministers meet their match in the bride whose notions of *her* Catholic church ceremony include the ideal of the “fairytale wedding”—a virtual ritual space that is really real, and the more virtual, given its mediation through digital technology: the e-magazines, websites and blogs, television and movie scenes, and marketing that altogether shape the “picture-perfect wedding.” That plethora of societal influences upon the bride and groom’s imagining of their wedding puts pressure on their ritual agency, but still most often especially on that of the bride, who senses that other women will judge her accountable for whether the wedding “went off well.”<sup>44</sup>

This altogether makes for a remarkably complex situation, all the more difficult because the ideological values and assumptions all parties hold—clergy and lay—are not in ritual practice consciously articulated. While multiple social forces are contributing to the decline in marriage among Euro-American Catholics, one factor surely is the dissonance many of the laity experience between their human agency and religious ideology and the ideology of the official expert class of the church, namely, the bishops and clergy. The overall situation would seem to be an instance of what Bell argues can take place when the high-level leadership of a social body ritually construct power in relation to the “microrelations of power that shape daily life” at the society’s lower level: “changes in the latter level can precipitate a crisis in which the demands of ritual to conform to traditional models clash with the ability of those rites to resonate with the real experiences of the social body.”<sup>45</sup>

Such is just some of the evidence that the sacrament of marriage—and by extension, every rite in the Roman Catholic tradition—does not somehow exist noetically and need only be

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<sup>42</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 188.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 192–93.

<sup>44</sup> I am indebted to members of the Emerging Critical Resources for Liturgical Studies seminar of the North American Academy of Liturgy, who provided me with this and other insights while discussing this material with me during a session of our annual meeting in Montreal, January 6, 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice*, 213.

expressed ritually. This, no doubt, is yet again my stating the obvious, but I offer the example as a case that may help the wider theological audience appreciate what is at stake among the present generation of sacramental-liturgical theologians as we pursue the seemingly asymptotic implications of the twentieth-century liturgical-theological consensus that the actual celebrations of rites comprise the “primary theology”<sup>46</sup> of the church. This is to try to get at something of the “long mediations” of truth with a humility hopefully approximating Chauvet’s, not just in the immediate moment but, through the hard work of publication, for the benefit of generations to come—that is, assuming (hoping!) that there will be in future centuries people interested in tracing the longer arc of truth’s mediation in the ongoing praxis of Catholic and Christian traditions. This is to understand our vocation as providing a record of both the theory and practice of the sacramental rites of the church in this volatile period of its history, and this in the register of not mere observers but ecclesially committed theologians.

What distinguishes the work as theological, in comparison and contrast to others engaged in what anthropologist Ronald Grimes broadly identifies as “ritual criticism,”<sup>47</sup> are the particular criteria of judgment regarding the efficaciousness of the church’s liturgical practices as well as the official and academic practices of writing thereon. Given the present and increasingly polarized ecclesial situation, the clerical assertions of control, the emptying pews, the youthful and even middle-aged alienation of the faithful, the hegemony of market- and technologically-driven individualism to the detriment of the commonweal, the task for sacramental-liturgical theology is to provide church and academy perceptive, descriptive, and analytical work to help articulate what is going on and to venture judgments about what the church’s ongoing sacramental-liturgical tradition has to offer, as well as how that ritual treasury is being profitably exploited or tragically squandered in practice. This surely is not to surrender the theological task to religious studies. What marks such work as theological, as it does Chauvet’s, is the recourse to the biblical content of the faith as mediated through the mutually informing practices of word, sacrament, and ethics, studied scientifically in present contexts and with ongoing recourse to history and tradition, to traditions enacted historically.<sup>48</sup> And so, I conclude with a bow to truth as performatively known and practically lived in an ongoing dialectic of liturgy and ethics, for articulation of that tension may be a principal way for sacramental-liturgical theology to serve its publics, present and future.

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<sup>46</sup> See David W. Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What Is Liturgical Theology?* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand Books, 2004), 39–45.

<sup>47</sup> See Ronald L. Grimes, “The Scholarly Contexts and Practices of Ritual Criticism,” in *Ritual Criticism: Case Studies in Its Practice, Essays on Its Theory* (Columbia: University of South Carolina, 1990), 210–33; at 214–15.

<sup>48</sup> My most sustained exercise of this method of liturgical theology may be found in my biblically, historically, social-scientifically, and ritually constructed theology of the Roman Catholic Church’s current rites for the sick, dying, deceased, and mourners. See, Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., *Divine Worship and Human Healing: Liturgical Theology at the Margins of Life and Death* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2009). For an even more recent and highly successful example, see Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011).