

A GLOBAL SIGN OF OUTWARD GRACE: THE SACRAMENTALITY OF THE WORLD CHURCH IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION*

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“What is a sacrament?” I was asked to answer this question when I was sixteen-going-on seventeen and on the verge of formally converting to Catholic Christianity. I had never heard the word “sacrament” before. My mother tongue did not and still does not have a word for it; we simply, conveniently transliterate it as “*esakramenti*.” Unbeknownst to me, my parroted response from *The Baltimore Catechism*, “an outward sign instituted by Christ to give grace,” blended arguments and counterarguments, claims and counterclaims, reaching back to Aristotle via patristic, Scholastic, and neo-Scholastic philosophers and theologians. Years later, with the benefit of theological studies, I discovered how, unwittingly, Aristotle bequeathed to Thomas Aquinas and the Scholastic tradition a vocabulary for crafting the basic architecture of sacramental theology.¹ Had I known this earlier, perhaps in my youthful exuberance I could have blindsided the catechist who asked me to define sacrament with the argument that, given its bias, the medieval understanding of the term would seem to suggest that Aristotle, not Jesus Christ, instituted the sacraments!

I take consolation in the knowledge that in theory and practice the idea of sacrament defines a conceptual field that affirms the revelatory capability of human experience and the historical quality of divine self-communication. As Susan Ross reminds us, this concept or principle “is not an invention of Christianity.”² Sacramentality, “broadly understood, is an essential element of universal religious consciousness.”³ The word may not exist in my language, but my original indigenous religious tradition that lavishly expresses its beliefs in signs and symbols, rituals and worship to create an environment of encounter with the divine, served as the theological birthplace of my experience of sacramentality and transcendence. Consequently, I recognize the sacramentality of mundane events and moments of daily life from birth to death, through life, work, community, relationship, joy, laughter, pain, and sorrow. I now believe that, as Tanzanian theologian Laurenti Magesa points out, there are other sacraments of life, that is, “visible signs of grace” that can claim inspiration from “the spirit of the saving work of Christ.”⁴

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¹ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 79–85.

² Susan Ross, *Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology* (New York: Continuum, 1998), 35.

³ German Martinez, *Signs of Freedom: Theology of the Christian Sacraments* (New York: Paulist, 2003), 11.

⁴ Laurenti Magesa, *Anatomy of Inculturation: Transforming the Church in Africa* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications, 2004), 252. Magesa equates two exemplary rituals to sacraments in the Christian sense: ritual reconciliation and ritual installation of a leader (252–53).

AUDACITY OF SACRAMENTALITY

As a principle, sacramentality makes an audacious claim: that human beings personally, bodily, culturally, and communally, can participate in the life of God by means of ritual that imbues and transforms the ordinary with the presence of God. As James White puts it, it is the “concept that the outward and visible can convey the inward and spiritual.”⁵ According to Bernard Cooke, this is an existential claim that “We exist sacramentally.”⁶ Although we can debate the sense and nonsense of the proposition that sacraments were instituted by Christ, there is no denying the fact that it remains a theological concept deeply rooted in the New Testament. Even in his vitriolic lamentation of “the Babylonian captivity of the church” on account of the latter’s sacramental excesses, Martin Luther conceded the scriptural basis and christological warrant of sacramental life.⁷

I find it intriguing that, alongside the clarity with which we affirm the centrality of sacramentality in Christian life, there exist palpable dissatisfaction and disaffection, so intense that several theologians have not ceased to announce that, as church, we are “passing through a profound crisis of sacramentality.”⁸ I am tempted to ask: crisis? What crisis? Some theologians assume it and therefore neither identify nor describe the crisis while others situate it at the level of diminishing numbers of clergy,⁹ decline in sacramental participation and practice, or secularization (“desacralization”) of society.¹⁰

Much debate has occurred since the official enumeration of the seven sacraments. In hindsight, the attempt to settle the controversies and fix the borders of this debate definitively in the Middle Ages by influential Scholastics no less formidable than Peter Lombard, Aquinas, and Bonaventure failed to achieve its goal. Indeed the passing of the years has not been entirely favorable to this rich notion of sacraments. The cause is in part that the Catholic tradition has limited the sacraments to seven but extends to the fact that it has largely tended to domesticate its practice in private and perfunctory rites.¹¹ Besides, the ground for such codification of sacraments and their celebration is contested by those who are excluded from taking direct responsibility for the practice and celebration of the sacraments. As a theologian reading the lessons of history, I find the acceptance of seven official sacraments compatible with a certain

⁵ James F. White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1999), 13. See Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement: Sacramental Participation in the Trinitarian Mystery* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2011), 23–31; Herbert Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1992), 27.

⁶ Bernard Cooke, *Sacraments and Sacramentality* (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), 54. See also Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 11.

⁷ White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, 17–18.

⁸ Martinez, *Signs of Freedom*, 4.

⁹ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 23–24, 32–33.

¹⁰ Juan Luis Segundo, *The Sacraments Today*, trans. John Drury (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1974), 3–28.

¹¹ For the Latin Rite Churches, the 13th century is watershed for the standardization and canonization of the seven official sacraments. See Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 66. The Eastern churches are unique in not reducing the sacraments to a fixed number or set. Following the lead of Martin Luther, Protestant churches recognize only two sacraments, Baptist and Eucharist, as satisfying the criteria of having been the subject of Christ’s scriptural command and promise and having an accompanying physical visible sign (White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, 16–18).

Protestant “freedom of interpretation” of the principle of sacramentality that recognizes its inherent ambiguity and fluidity.¹²

The twin idea of freedom of interpretation and ambiguity also connects well with the historical development of our understanding of sacramentality, evidence of which emerges clearly in the way and manner that it has metamorphosed through various stages of comprehension. The life cycle of sacraments has passed through signification, causality, symbolization, and performance relative to grace as its outcome. Characteristically, the plethora of definitions and reformulations of the meaning of sacraments includes snippets of all four aspects.¹³ Of particular significance is George Worgul’s assertion that Christian sacraments express or transmit “analogical, primordial, and operational” “root metaphors,” the root metaphor of Christian culture being the crucified and risen Christ.¹⁴

ECCLESIAL SACRAMENTALITY RECONSIDERED

The principle of sacramentality makes a second audacious claim that constitutes the primary focus of this paper. Henri de Lubac framed this claim in terms that arguably have become the most familiar mantra in sacramental theology: “If Christ is the sacrament of God, the Church is for us the sacrament of Christ.”¹⁵ Or, as Karl Rahner prefers: Jesus Christ is the “primordial sacrament of salvation,”¹⁶ the church is the “basic (or fundamental) sacrament of the salvation of humankind.”¹⁷ Naturally, this claim forms parts of a triptych that includes God as the ultimate source of grace, Christ as the historical incarnation of God’s grace, and church as temporal mediation of this grace.¹⁸ Leaving aside the obvious matter of the sacramentality of Christ, ecclesial sacramentality holds that the visible community of Christians “through its existential actions, contains, manifests, and communicates the saving presence of Christ.”¹⁹ I could be wrong, but I imagine that, like his question to the sister of Lazarus, Jesus’ response to this somewhat triumphalist assertion would have sounded like “Really? Do you believe this?” Happily, *The Baltimore Catechism* also taught me that I required faith to believe this! As a basic premise, I propose that the claim that the church is the fundamental sacrament of Christ needs to be scrutinized contextually and historically before being instituted as the basis of a universal theory of the instrumentality and efficaciousness of the institutional church, as the privileged repository and conduit for God’s grace.

Being a convert to Christianity, I confidently claim the benefit of experiencing other systems of symbolic ritual representation and mediation of transcendence. My experience of these alternative systems grounds my belief that no single historical institution can exhaust the

¹² White, *The Sacraments in Protestant Practice and Faith*, 16; Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 39.

¹³ Michael G. Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Contemporary Sacramental Theology* (Omaha, NE: Creighton University, 1995), 51; George S. Worgul, *From Magic to Metaphor: A Validation of Christian Sacraments* (New York: Paulist, 1980), 123; Karl Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments* (New York: Seabury, 1977), xvi; Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 13.

¹⁴ Worgul, *From Magic to Metaphor*, 186, 195.

¹⁵ Quoted in Bernard P. Prusak, *The Church Unfinished: Ecclesiology through the Centuries* (New York: Paulist, 2004), 66. For a discussion of the origin and historical development of this claim, see 63–69; 278–280; Vorgrimler, *Sacramental Theology*, 30–40.

¹⁶ Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments*, xv.

¹⁷ Ibid. See Karl Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1963), 18.

¹⁸ See Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 35.

¹⁹ Segundo, *Sacraments Today*, 15.

principle of sacramentality. In this regard, I take as instructive the position of theologians who prioritize the symbolic component or nature of sacraments and emphasize how symbols participate in the reality to which they point, open up/reveal new dimensions of reality otherwise humanly inaccessible, and shape human action.²⁰ One aspect of the understanding of symbol that has become axiomatic in the discourse on sacramentality is the realization that the participatory character of symbol renders it inadequate to the reality toward which it points. As one African proverb says, no matter how long a log floats in water, it will never become a crocodile! To be sure, this affirmation of the radical limitation and complexity of symbols relative to the reality they symbolize introduces a standard for assessing sacramental signification that does not morally exempt the community called church *considered as sacrament of Christ*. Nor do the sacramental activities and practices of the church alone exhaust its sacramental identity, because this identity rests on and bears witness to a reality that transcends the church, namely the reign of God.²¹

Excursus: Louis-Marie Chauvet

At this point Louis-Marie Chauvet's contribution to the discussion is apropos. Without a doubt, Chauvet has broken new and significant ground in the contemporary understanding of sacraments and sacramentality, for which he is justly to be recognized and commended. However, I would argue that on the question of ecclesial sacramentality, Chauvet's idea of Jesus' active "presence in absence," which compels "assent to the mediation of the church," leaves too much to the institutional church as the mediation of the "Absent One."²² I agree with the view that sacramentality is inherently ambiguous, proven by the singular capacity of material symbols to reveal and conceal simultaneously the presence of God, as Ross has demonstrated beyond doubt.²³ However, Chauvet's treatment of faith as an "assent to loss," or sacramentality as symbolic mediation of "presence in absence," contains significant pitfalls. My argument rests on three points. First, the idea that lack of immediate access to the divine necessitates human language and mediation opens the risk of reducing sacramentality to the level of the merely functional, economic, and utilitarian. Second, the risk of co-option, that is, magically trapping God in human action, while surreptitiously claiming divine warrant and sanction for the latter, even when such actions condone or perpetuate unjust behavior.²⁴ Third, and more critical, is the risk of interposing an institutional edifice between God and the people of God, thereby obscuring

²⁰ See Lawler, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 23ff.; Martinez, *Signs of Freedom*, 18ff. Worgul, *Magic to Metaphor*, identifies many levels of symbolic representation and participation: anthropological, sociological, psychological, and theological.

²¹ I am alluding to the "distinction between the incarnational and eschatological notions of sacramentality as it applies to the church" (Richard P. McBrien, *The Church: The Evolution of Catholicism* [New York: HarperCollins, 2008], 165). See Roger Haight, *The Christian Community in History*, vol. 2 (New York: Continuum, 2005), 389.

²² Louis-Marie, Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 1997). See Bruce T. Morrill, S.J., "Building on Chauvet's Work: An Overview," in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God: Engaging the Fundamental Theology of Louis-Marie Chauvet*, ed. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press), xvii, xviii.

²³ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 39.

²⁴ Belcher, *Efficacious Engagement*, 23.

the simple truth that grace is everywhere at all times, unconditioned and unhindered by the machination of human beings and their religious institutions.²⁵

My purpose for this brief excursus has been to draw out Chauvet's idea of "absence," and offer me offer one example of why I emphasize the complexity, ambiguity, or limitation of ecclesial sacramentality. For lack of a better term, I shall call it the sacramental effacement of the "mystery of woman."

Effacement of the "mystery [sacrament] of woman"

It is instructive that Blessed John Paul II wrote about the "mystery (read: sacrament) of woman" in *Mulieris Dignitatem* (1988, no. 31) and repeated it in "Letter of Pope John Paul II to Women" (1995, no. 1). At its best, in consonance with the spirit of Vatican II's liturgical reforms, ecclesial sacramentality prioritizes active participation and wide inclusivity; in practice, however, it is used by some as warrant to exclude women from sacramental ministry and leadership. And here is my point: if truth be told, to borrow Chauvet's terminology, in this highly institutional church, the "Absent one" is woman—she who is repeatedly banished beyond the borders of relevance as girl-child, daughter, sister, wife, (m)other, or theologian.²⁶ I come from a church that glorifies African women as the "backbone" of the church but only allows them lean pickings when it comes to sacramental participation and ministerial leadership.²⁷ Edward Schillebeeckx has done sacramental theology and ecclesiology an immense service by proposing a definition of the sacraments that cuts through centuries of conceptual opacity and dogmatic controversy. He declared: "This is precisely what the sacraments are: the face of redemption turned visibly towards us, so that in them we are truly able to encounter the living Christ."²⁸ His insightful understanding of what sacraments mean and do in the church evokes personal memories of my field research in communities devastated by HIV/AIDS, displaced by war, or ravaged by poverty in eastern Africa, as a result of which I came to the conclusion that "the face of the church that most PWA [people living with AIDS] see in close proximity is that of lay women and religious sisters. In the measure that this face embodies solidarity, compassion, and unconditional love and announces the gospel of liberation from disease, it is the authentic face—perhaps the only one there is—of the church."²⁹ Reformulated in light of Schillebeeckx's definition of sacraments, I would argue that in many parts of Africa lay women and religious sisters have shown themselves to be the "face of redemption turned visibly" toward the sick, the refugees, the poor, and the church. Through the unrequited but prophetic fidelity to the mission of Christ of these women, the sick, the displaced, and the poor are "truly able to encounter the living Christ." As church, so long as we surreptitiously but tenaciously rehearse the politics of discrimination and exclusion, we stand before God as Cain, befuddled by a question that no magisterial wand can simply wish away. And the question is this: "Church, where is your sister?"

²⁵ Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments*, xi, xiii.

²⁶ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 155–60.

²⁷ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* (Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation), no. 58.

²⁸ Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1963), 43–44.

²⁹ Agbonkhianmeghe E. Orobator, *From Crisis to Kairos: the Mission of the Church in the Time of HIV/AIDS, Refugees and Poverty* (Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications, 2005), 138.

Church, where is your mother?”³⁰ Thus for women anywhere in the church, the question of whether sacraments are truly channels of grace remains relevant.³¹

In light of this example, the first point that I want to stress is that our church totters on the brink of compromising its identity as the basic sacrament of salvation. Ross’ work provides ample evidence for the argument that “the sacramental life of the church will wither without full dialogue with the voices of women.”³² In stating my case, I am not oblivious to Rahner’s monumental claim that the “Church, as the socially constituted presence of Christ in every age up to the end” is the “permanent and unsurpassable sign” that “perpetuates Christ’s presence” in “the whole of history.”³³ I would take a different stance. In light of the historicity and fallibility of the Church *as we know it*, it seems reasonable to caution against such grandiloquent, trans-temporal, and triumphalist declamations. Ecclesial sacramentality generates both ethical and pastoral criteria, namely, that the church “is a community that must practice what it preaches and teaches to others.”³⁴ Or, as Joseph Komonchak puts it: “Its very existence is supposed to make the world different.”³⁵

In the court of public opinion, on the evidence of current events, this “socially constituted,” hierarchically regimented, dogmatically policed, and clerically controlled community called church increasingly *signifies* hurt and pain for some people of God on account of their vulnerability (sexually abused children and minors), silence and intimidation for others on account of their honest engagement in the venerable task of *fides quaerens intellectum* (censored theologians), and exclusion and marginalization for many, very many, on account of their gender, race, or social location (women, people of color, and the poor). I contend that these multiple degrees of exclusion and polarization stultify the pivotal claim of Vatican II regarding ecclesial sacramentality as a sign of communion with God and among women and men (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 1; *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 5). As such, they negate the very principle of sacramentality. It makes me wonder—and herein lies a true sacramental crisis—how can this basic, fundamental sacrament of Christ also conspire to conceal “God’s extravagant affections” from the People of God?³⁶

Sacramentality in the era of globalization

The principle of sacramentality both localizes and globalizes God’s saving presence and activity. Pushed to the limit, it offers a way out of the impasse often read into the position of Vatican II on the tension between the local church and the universal church (See *Lumen Gentium*, ch. 3). The evidence before us shows clearly that the southward growth of the community called church reflects elements of what God is doing in our time. This growth

³⁰ See Michael Budde, *The Borders of Baptism: Identities, Allegiances, and the Church* (Eugene, OR: Cascade, 2011), 114.

³¹ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 231.

³² *Ibid.*, 33.

³³ Rahner, *Meditations on the Sacraments*, xv.

³⁴ McBrien, *The Church*, 166.

³⁵ Joseph A. Komonchak, “The Significance of Vatican II for Ecclesiology,” in *The Gift of the Church: A Textbook on Ecclesiology in Honor of Patrick Granfield, O.S.B.*, ed. Peter C. Phan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical, 2000), 90.

³⁶ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 9.

signifies particular graces of renewal and regeneration that I consider indispensable for the reality that we routinely refer to as world church. Here I take seriously what Ugandan theologian Emmanuel Katongole poignantly designates as “the politics of the incarnation, the story of God who ‘dwells among us’ and who invests local existence with an eternal significance.”³⁷ The principle of sacramentality not only allows us to perceive the “eternal significance” of the incarnation of the church in its local context; it also permits us to celebrate its *global* significance for the world church. If church is “a sign of God’s saving presence among God’s people,” “this presence is not abstract but is always concrete in a particular locality.”³⁸ The southward growth of Christianity pulls the church toward places it would rather not go while drawing in people it would rather not welcome, as the phenomenon of migration has made clear in several parts of the church. Among the many fruits of ecclesial development in the global south is the ability to map more clearly a broader ecclesiological topography in order to recognize, honor, and celebrate the unique context, gift, and contribution of each local church for the re-creation of the world church. So, when we turn to Latin America we discover relationality, community, and solidarity with the poor as the defining features of sacramentality;³⁹ when we turn to Asia we marvel at immense possibilities for encountering God anew in ancient religious traditions long considered esoteric and arcane; and, when we turn to Africa, cultures and traditions previously disparaged as mere “shadows and images” (*Lumen Gentium*, no. 16) splendidly reflect the face and presence of the living God.⁴⁰

Let me voice a caveat. In approaching the growth of global Christianity we need to avoid an Orwellian fetishism that categorizes all things Western as bad and all things Southern as good —“four legs good, two legs bad”! It would be dishonest to assume that the southward growth of the church never signifies worrisome tendencies. One example that readily comes to mind is the oft-repeated argument that some of the contentious issues facing the world church do not pose challenges to the churches of the south. I do not claim particular expertise for Latin America and Asia, as I modestly do for Africa. Human and family life issues (sexual orientation, same-sex union, abortion, contraception, divorce, polygamy, etc.), abuse of feminine bodies, and misuse of clerical and ecclesiastical authority are as neuralgic in Africa as they have proved to be for churches of the north. Any facile presumption of ecclesial innocence in Africa poorly conceals a disturbing disconnect from reality. As shallow and exploitative forms of Christianity mushroom in the face of vexing socio-economic and political crises, the People of God question the sign value of *Ecclesia in Africa* with passion and persistence. I see here the need for ongoing, critical cross-ecclesial conversation and a reminder to be on guard against romanticized appraisals of the southward growth of Christianity as an incontrovertible sign of God’s grace.

However, I consider as one of the greatest sign values of this southward growth the realization that the questions for the church are no longer to be formulated unilaterally. How we frame and deal with these questions will respect the views, experiences, and wisdom coming from all constituents of the world church. The true church of Christ will be one that privileges

³⁷ Emmanuel Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa: A Political Theology for Africa* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 144.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 143.

³⁹ James Empeur and Eduardo Fernández, *La Vida Sacra: Contemporary Hispanic Sacramental Theology* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2006), 37, 45; 35–40.

⁴⁰ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no. 92.

learning and listening over dogmatic assertions and hasty suppression of faithful dissent⁴¹—a church that is constantly, humbly, and self-critically attuned to what the Spirit is saying to the particular churches, both in the global south and in the global north (see Revelation 2:11).

Ecological sacramentality

In the era of globalization the principle of sacramentality confronts the church with the challenge of creating new and broader symbolic expressions.⁴² I would like to propose a generic example of this symbolic expression, namely the created order. Essentially, the principle of sacramentality affirms the sacredness of all creation and enables a “sacramental view of creation,”⁴³ that God has pitched tent in our midst. Thus, from an ecclesiological perspective, over and above all claims, sacramentality becomes shorthand for the incarnation. I doubt that we would contest the view that “nature as creation is a sacrament, a visible representation of God, to whom it ultimately belongs.”⁴⁴

Pope Benedict XVI rightly reminds us that this implies paying attention to a dual ecology: human and environmental.⁴⁵ Regarding the latter, our growing consciousness of the responsibility and duty of care for the earth is itself an important sign of the saving presence of Christ in our church and world. What I am not so sure about is how we understand and relate the principle of sacramentality to human ecology, especially when it concerns the bodies and experiences of women, men, and children who do not possess the clerical mandate conferred by sacramental ordination license that has enabled a small minority to monopolize access to authority, power, and privilege, without the requisite badge of humble service, in the sacramental economy of Catholic Christianity.

Sacramental ethics

My final point concerns the connection between sacramentality and ethics, a connection already evident in what has preceded. The sad legacy of preoccupation with legalism, nominalism, and textual positivism in sacramental theology is the tendency to confuse liturgical worship with rubrics or reduce it to a series of common actions while puritanically policing the boundaries of form and matter. This is a form of distraction at a time when a rapidly secularizing society probes the claim to sanctity of ministers who play mediatory roles and powers in the community called church. For believers and non-believers, For this “public,” ecclesial sacramentality can no longer be confined magically to an antiquated *ex opere operato* model, precisely because conformity to right intention, scripted rhetoric, and perfunctory rubrics alone no longer satisfies as minimum conditions of efficacious mediation of God’s grace. Proper sacramental performance, it seems to me, is judged by the authenticity of justice, depth of mercy, and quality of compassion, not as theological abstractions, but ethical ecclesial praxis. The sacramentality of the world church will flourish or flounder in the measure that it elects to

⁴¹ Elochukwu Uzukwu, *A Listening Church: Autonomy and Communion in African Churches* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 1996).

⁴² Martinez, *Signs of Freedom*, 23.

⁴³ Ross, *Extravagant Affections*, 36, 178.

⁴⁴ Charles M. Murphy, *At Home on Earth: Foundations for a Catholic Ethic of the Environment* (New York: Crossroad, 1989), 26.

⁴⁵ Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate* (2009), nos. 51 and 48.

remain faithful to the authentic practices that Jesus instituted as signs of grace and manifestations of the in-breaking of the reign of God into human history—I mean the sacraments of announcing good news to the poor, proclaiming liberty to captives, giving sight to the ignorant, liberating the down-trodden, welcoming the outcast and the unloved...(see Luke 4: 18–19).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

I would like to conclude by returning to the second of three constitutive elements in Chauvet's sacramental framework of knowledge, gratitude, and ethical behavior⁴⁶ The evolution of the community called church into a world church—long predicted by Karl Rahner—is fulfilled in part by the southward movement of Christianity. Sometimes, in the varied reactions to this ecclesial evolution, I detect an attitude resembling Jesus' prediction that some will rejoice while others weep. The churches of the global south rejoice in the unprecedented growth of Christianity while the churches of the global north lament its diminishment. As I see it, there is one church: the Body of Christ. Growth and diminishment represent not polar opposites but dynamic composites that truly and vividly capture the ambiguity and mystery of the sacramental constitution of the People of God from east to west and north to south. The ultimate value of the principle of sacramentality lies not solely in the vehicular capacity of symbols but in their sheer vivacity. I believe that the southward growth of the community called church contains irrepressible signs of life and grace for the rejuvenation of the world church.

Finally, I believe that there is in the community called church today a paradigm shift resembling an ecclesial Copernican revolution.⁴⁷ Where once with dogmatic certitude we fixed a monolithic Euro-American culture as the center of the church, we see now that the churches of the global north are but particular bodies of an ecclesial constellation of churches in night sky of the world church amidst myriad other constellations in the expanding ecclesial universe—vibrant, diverse, complex, and efficacious signs and symbols of Christ's saving presence in the world. The multi-dimensional, multi-cultural, and multi-ethnic constitution of the community called church invites us to a feast of diversity and a banquet of plurality, spread out on the table of mutuality, appreciation, and gratitude for each human being as mystery, as sacrament of God, as *Imago Dei*. I believe that it lies within the realm of possibility to transform our church into a truly catholic and richly textured patchwork of different genders, races, generations, orientations, ministries, and faith traditions that signify and embody the saving presence of God in our midst.

⁴⁶ Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 13.

⁴⁷ Rahner speaks of a Copernican revolution occasioned by the shift from individualization and privatization of sacraments to their insertion into the history of salvation and radical self-communication of God to humankind.