

A RESPONSE TO STEPHEN HAPPEL

Professor Happel has presented us with a comprehensive survey of the contributions of language studies to sacramental theology, a skillful analysis of the influence of Paul Ricoeur in the field, and a challenge to question the direction that sacramental theology has taken in its embrace of Ricoeur's theories. I have been educated and challenged by Professor's Happel's fine paper, and express my thanks for his charting the way through the thicket of language, sacrament, and social transformation.

While there is much to respond to, I hope I err on the side of brevity in focusing my response on two issues raised by this paper. First, I will note the way in which Happel calls for a retrieval of the Roman Catholic sacramental tradition in his questioning the adoption of Ricoeur by sacramental theologians such as David Power. My response will indicate the different areas where Happel and I see problems in Ricoeur's analysis. Indeed, sometimes it seems that the invocation of Ricoeur at this meeting and by theologians in general is not unlike Thomas Aquinas's frequent invocation of "The Philosopher." Second, I will comment on Happel's own sacramental theology, as he describes it in the last part of his paper, and I will raise some questions on the present context of our sacramental life: is our worship indeed transforming us?

First, I hear Happel calling us to return to the roots of the sacramental tradition. By this I mean an appreciation for the dialectic between human and divine, between the sinful and the graced, but an even greater confidence in the analogical basis for the sacraments. As Happel remarks, the use of Ricoeur in sacramental theology "proves both too much and too little." In using Ricoeur's understanding of metaphor as model, the sacraments proclaim "a totally other reality," yet only offer this new world as possibility, as "deferred reality." I hear echoes of *ex opere operato*, of the conviction that the sacraments themselves transform. Rather than the Reformed understanding of sacrament, in which celebration is "memorial" or is judgment on our present divisions, Happel argues for a theology of sacrament which gradually "patterns" us, in which we "try out the truths and values" disclosed in sacramental celebration, in which real presence slowly but inevitably transforms our sinful human condition.

I do, however, have some hesitations with the theological anthropology of Ricoeur, which, while not specifically addressed by Happel, nevertheless grounds Ricoeur's theological vision. Here I would want to pose the question: in a retrieval of the analogical basis of the sacramental tradition (and, I should add here, a critically-informed retrieval, as Happel has so skillfully shown), how do we define the self? The sacramental question is, I wager, bound up with the anthropological question: Liturgically, how do we renew ourselves? How do we repent for our sins?

What rituals and images respond to the deep questions and splits in our experiences?

The language of Ricoeur, and of Power's use of Ricoeur, describes the subject of sacramental action as a person who must "divest," "re-configure," "dispossess," and "humiliate" the self in order to live in the world which the work of art and the sacraments both envisage and proclaim. As Happel points out at the beginning of the paper, sacraments have been seen as a "remedy" for sin (and this is part of his argument with Ricoeur), but the nature of this sin cannot be uncritically assumed by contemporary theologians. As Valerie Saiving,¹ Judith Plaskow,² Sandra Schneiders,³ and others have suggested, our understandings of sin are inextricably bound to our understanding of our experience. For women, as for many of those *already* dispossessed, the language of dispossession and humiliation proves to be problematic when it comes to *how* one "reconfigures" one's self. We need, then, to exercise great caution in our use of models in theological anthropology. I would suggest here that Ricoeur may be problematic not only in his dialectical interpretation of sacrament, but that this problematic is at least partly rooted in his anthropology. The "self" to whom the sacraments refer is a critical question and I invite Happel to respond to this issue.

The second part of my response focuses on the sacramental theology Happel proposes. Again, in response to the clashing, paradoxical, shattering new world which Ricoeur's sacramental ontology proposes, Happel suggests a world which insinuates itself into our awareness: sometimes directly, sometimes seductively. Our sensibilities are patterned as we are faced with the images and metaphors of freedom and love. Happel comments how in sacramental action, "we say 'we' without much hesitation"; "we can rest in the world created by the sacramental actions and words. We know we are 'at home'." I find Happel's own picture of sacraments a fundamentally optimistic one: a community living together—or at least trying to do so—offering at "various levels of participation" a vision of Christian love. In this vision, the community is bound neither to the aesthetic nor to the ideological as norm.

I wish I could share the optimism of Happel's vision and see the connections and analogies between our present lives and the transformation which the title of this paper bears: "Worship as a Grammar of Social Transformation." Let me give some reasons for my hesitation. First, being a person oriented to the concrete (as, I suspect, most sacramental theologians are), I had hoped to find some concrete examples of the ways in which the Christian sacraments are enabling us to live, as Happel puts it, "the history we would like to make for ourselves." But I find it difficult to see how our sacramental language, its prevailing images and metaphors, are fully embodying this history. Professor Happel says that "we need to

¹Valerie Saiving, "The Human Situation: A Feminine View," in Carol P. Christ and Judith Plaskow, eds., *Womanspirit Rising: A Feminist Reader in Religion* (San Francisco and New York: Harper and Row, 1979).

²Judith Plaskow, *Sex, Sin and Grace: Women's Experience and the Theologies of Reinhold Niebuhr and Paul Tillich* (Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1980).

³Sandra M. Schneiders, "The Effects of Women's Experience on Their Spirituality," *Spirituality Today* 35 (Summer 1983) 100-16.

look at the lack of women's presence in presbyteral roles in Roman Catholic worship and ask why." I think we *have* asked this question, and it is not just whether women can or should occupy presbyteral roles, but it is the question of the disclosiveness of the very roles themselves and the language and images surrounding these roles. Like Happel, I too envision dialogically honest communities and systematically undistorted communication, but the communal and relational language which we both would like to hear is not spoken often enough in present sacramental practice. Perhaps we have different things in mind, or perhaps we are looking at the same glass: for one half full and for one half empty. But here, I seek concrete embodiment of this vision: in language, in images of God, in the experiences our rituals celebrate.

Secondly, the deep sense of alienation which has motivated women to establish what Rosemary Ruether calls *Womenchurch* alongside the tradition, and which has pushed Black Catholics to reappropriate their own deeply expressive tradition, calls us to examine the extent to which we are "at home" and so pushes us outside the walls of our home to look in our gardens, garages, backyards, and alleys for other possibilities of transformation. One of the accomplishments of Vatican II, and that of theologians such as Rahner and Schillebeeckx, has been to expend our notion of the sacramental: not as magically located only within a thin flat wafer but rather as embodied within all who seek to make real the Christian vision. We can, of course, get carried away with this idea so that when all is sacramental, nothing is. But the profound insight here—and it is here that I do think Ricoeur's work is instructive—is that we need to be sensitive to the divine presence even where we least expect it, or as the parables put it, where we least want it.

What I find helpful and appealing in what I am calling Happel's retrieval of ideas of sacramental efficacy is a sense of confidence in those events, situations, and experiences where in fact we do find glimmers of this Christian community. But I merely suggest here that we broaden our vision to include newer examples to God's real presence in our midst, as well as clean up our own house so that this presence can be seen, heard, and felt by all.

There are many other issues raised by Happel's paper, which I am sure that the discussion will touch upon. But in closing, let me add my own voice to Happel's in the hopes that we can and shall express—in our multiple languages, in creative ways—our engagement in our struggle to "create a paradise on earth."

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