

A RESPONSE TO JILL RAITT

I, too, was pleased when President-elect Shawn Copeland asked me to respond to Jill Raitt's address, even, of course, before I had seen it, knowing that the topic of the vocation of the theologian was something that I would very much like to think about, particularly in this gathering. I recall one of our meetings of a few years ago that had as its focus the Eucharist. The papers and plenary addresses of that meeting gave evidence over and over of a deep and thoughtful engagement with our lived and shared ecclesial commitment. Perhaps, given the recent text *Eucharistia in Ecclesia*, offered by Pope John Paul II this past Holy Thursday, we will return to this topic at a future conference. If I had to put it in one word, I would say that I've always found the intellectual sensibility of the CTSA to be extraordinarily wholesome—and, in the sexy, transgressive scholarly world, you are probably the only academic conference in the United States that will receive the label "wholesome" as the high praise I intend it to be! I thank you for this experience.

I am particularly pleased to respond to Professor Raitt. As she recalls her own journey as a woman scholar of religion, I thought of two contrasts. First, unlike Professor Raitt's experience, when I was seeking a job after graduate school, there were two positions in feminist theology at Catholic institutions, both of which were explicitly seeking a female academic to join an all-male department. And secondly, ten years later, as we were waiting for this session to begin, Professor Raitt turned to me, noting that we both are active in feminist scholarship and asked, "Were we supposed to do something feminist?" I think the fact that neither of us felt that we had to be "feminist" as our explicit or only framework is a sign of how far this scholarship has permeated the academy.

In her address, Professor Raitt calls for a crossing of boundaries, imagining the possibilities of such an approach for the disputes between the Reformed theologian Theodore Beza and the Lutheran Jacob Andreae in the sixteenth century. These disputes, about the relationship of the body of Christ to the eucharistic elements, turn, for Raitt, on the finding of a common perspective—that is, that a "sacramental union . . . for the spiritual nourishment of the faithful" does take place—without overly homogenizing the real differences these two traditions hold about Christology and the doctrine of grace. For Raitt, such a common perspective requires that the question of "where" the body of Christ is be set aside. This reconsideration of a sixteenth-century dispute is of value in our own day, Raitt argues, as we struggle to bridge the differences between received doctrinal boundaries and contemporary conceptual frameworks.

In addition, while she recognizes that her own youthful boundary crossing, occasionally unconscious, was freeing, Raitt also acknowledges, in her work to establish the Center for Religion, the Professions and the Public at the University of Missouri, that a healthy pluralistic society needs to mark carefully the sensibilities of a variety of religions, so as to coherently engage boundary markers.

I have three observations in response to her presentation.

First, Raitt's scholarly path, representing as it does a path that moves between the world of theology and the world of religious studies, represents a path that may become much more common for the generation of theologians now in graduate study. This has benefits, as we see that her presentation today laudably reframes a very "in-house" question of different Christian approaches to sacramental theology as a broader question about how religions think about the meeting of divinity and humanity. Yes, ecumenism and, for that matter, interreligious dialogue, is now necessary, as Raitt claims. More importantly, it is also fruitful, as was demonstrated last evening and again just now.

Raitt claims her audience for this discussion to be "parishioners in the twenty-first century." I think that this movement between and even carefully blurring the boundaries of religious studies and theology is crucial for addressing these parishioners. With many, I sometimes, somewhat condescendingly, deplore the general Catholic adult population's lack of a thick set of "Catholic" reference points. One would think, by the way that this lament is often framed, that if "Catholic stuff," in the imagined golden age, took up fifty percent of the average Catholic's brain, and now takes up only fifteen percent, that the thirty-five percent in question is now empty. But of course this is not true. Contemporary Catholics may be only passingly acquainted with the catechism but, as I have observed before, they all get cable—their religious framework is more complex, not merely "less Catholic." This is the reality that must be formative for our work.

Second, Raitt's selection of the issue about the spatial location of the body of Christ is particularly appropriate, it seems, to a postmodern milieu in which the "view from nowhere" has become the "view from everywhere." She correctly observes that the somewhat positivist mentality that would insist on a space and time response to this "where" does seem to be misguided. On the other hand, we might also argue that "where" is *precisely* the question, it is simply not a reducible question. Sacraments do traffic directly in the specifics of being human, they do claim rather explicit "wheres" when they name that "God with us" is here or there—in this cup, in these words of absolution. It is this passion for the question of "where" that grounds the "scandalous particularity" of the Incarnation. For the Christian this passion spills over into a passion for the world, in which the question cannot be reduced to a cartoon of postliberalism, in which the question would be merely "where" (here, and no where else), nor can it be reduced to a fundamentalist reading of the "deposit of faith"—as in "it says right here"—but rather, this question must become truly liberative, as "here" becomes graciously, generously, "Here."

I'm not sure that Raitt should want to lose the category "where," and I would even suggest that this category is key to our discussion. Indeed, without such a scandalous specificity, how can we have a discussion of boundaries and margins?

Third, while Raitt suggests a relational theology, I wonder whether one might want to begin with a relational ontology as a more flexible starting point in bridging the issue of "where" with the notion of faith. The question, I guess, is whether we have been overly modern in our understanding of God or our understanding of the real. Perhaps both.

Let me put this another way. In what sense is Raitt's call for the relational or participative "purpose" of sacraments a call for a *mutual* relation or participation? While Raitt elaborates on the role of sacraments in drawing the believer to God, in what way do sacraments make God present to us?

In other words, from Raitt's presentation, one can see how sacraments *function*, but the understanding of what they *are*, is less clear. But I give my hand away already. I do not think that what is offered in sacraments is either created, or exhausted, by my ability to engage with, or even receive, them. I would like to hear more about the framework by which Raitt understands the term "sacramental conjunction," in which the notion of sacrament is important, but so is the notion of conjunction, what "is" is, something that metonymy does not fully address.

In addition, central to such a relational approach is the acknowledgement that all of our speaking and writing do anthropomorphize God but, on the other hand, what else is an *anthropos* to do? And yet, while recognizing this context, and realizing that it by definition limits our God-talk, we do also claim, in faith, that this creature is not a point of impoverishment, but of revelation. Thus, and only thus, we profess boldly the important claims that are given to the custody of that tentative speech.

And finally, on the topic of *intellectual honesty*. Two interesting things happened to this theologian in the month of May. One was receiving this paper and preparing a response to it. The second was following the CTS list-serve discussion on "intellectual honesty," which often touched on the question of what theologians really mean when they refer to things like miracles and the resurrection.

Now, at the risk of compromising my own "wholesomeness" rating, I admit that it did occur to me, after reading several exchanges, that intellectual honesty, like honesty in marriage, is probably overrated. Let me clarify this. I do not suggest that both commitments should be merely qualified, shrugged off with a wink and a patronizing sneer, but rather that both intellect and love represent deep personal engagements that cannot be completely exhausted in sentences and paragraphs.

Indeed, with regard to our discussion of "location" above, recall, in marriage, the key phrase "she's left" or "he's already gone" in which the question "where" stands for much more than spatial coordinates. When we look at one another, with pain, after a key job loss, or hearing bad news about a child, or facing our failure to honor our commitments, what we need is not a lengthy and certainly

inadequate explanation, but simply to have the other come close and say, "I'm right here."

Professor Raitt is right, that "where" in a simplistic physical sense was the wrong question for disputes about the Eucharist at Montbéliard in the sixteenth century, and for religious seekers in our own time. But sometimes, for both God and for us, the very specific "Here I am," is the right answer.

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