

***The Mystery and Manners of Sacraments:
Reconstructing The Spiritual Relation Between Signs And Things Signified***

There are "Sacraments" (capital "S"), and then there is "sacramental." One without the other is like signs without things signified. And in Flannery O'Connor's words, "If it's only a symbol, then to hell with it!"

O'Conner was responding to fellow writer Mary McCarthy at a dinner party where it was boldly declared the Eucharist was a mere symbol. O'Conner later explained:

That was all the defense I was capable of at the time but I realize now that this is all I will ever be able to say about it, *outside of a story*, except that it is the center of existence for me. All the rest of life is expendable.

And the stories Flannery told! She wrote novels but her principle works were short stories, written before lupus took her life at 37. In each there was a search for the connection between local, particular, even carnal *manners* and the efficacious *mystery* of sacramental grace she believed deeply infused the spirituality of everyday life.

Influenced by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin's "Omega point," Flannery thought there was a sacramental convergence between the *manners* of local life and transformational *mystery* of grace. This was expressed in *Everything That Rises Must Converge*, and her reflective essays, *Mystery and Manners*.

Then, the crisis in sacramental spirituality was prompted by a rationalist reaction against the supernatural. Today, it's prompted by populist oriented globalism against the local, even if unintentionally. Such spirituality is celebrity-oriented, conference driven and largely virtual vis-à-vis digital podcasts, networking, blogs and social media.

There is the corollary absence of the human-divine participation in a gospel that is "presence focused" such as to be mediated and accessible in real-time. Consequently, the efficacious mystery of sacramental grace is absent the sacramental manners of local participation, the spiritual relation between the sign and things signified is severed and witness is without life on life power.

However *grace centered* in message or effective in enabling a reformation of grace to go viral, center city vs. inner city (mega church vs. parish church) spiritualities tend to usurp the *local*, flesh on flesh, carnal aspects of grace that is the "body of Christ"¹

The situation today again begs for Flannery's "then to hell with it!" There's an echo of that in Carl Trueman's ironic, *What if Life Was Complex?*² The situation also begs for the rediscovery of the convergence between nature and grace, sign and things signified, gracious *mystery* to sacramental *manners*. The question is therefore raised, what exactly does it mean to do the Sacraments in a sacramental way of church and life? What is the mystery and manners of a presence (temple) oriented spirituality?

¹ Eph. 1:23.

² Posted with comments on the Mission Anabaino blog by Kevin Nelson (www.anabaino.org)

The Sacramental Mystery (Easy to do, not so easy to understand)

The two Sacraments are Baptism (initiating/converting *means of grace*) and Lord's Supper (confirming/renewing *means of grace*). Notwithstanding some of the intramural debates about modes and forms-- easy to do. And yet the *efficacious grace* that begs for the convergence of sign (outward means of grace) and things signified (inward grace), or between sacraments and sacramental manners, is not so easy to understand. Here is an attempt, albeit embracing the ultimate mystery itself.³

Christians historically agree that the scriptures principally teach "the visible church, which is also catholic and universal, is the kingdom of the Lord Jesus Christ, the house and family of God, *out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation*."⁴

Notice especially the language of "visible," as in all the flesh-on-flesh ebb and flow of gathering together, working together, sharing life together. It is the church that "one-anothers" as to become local and corporate. Necessarily, the whole thing requires some organization, presumably one that is carefully designed by Christ himself as passed down through the apostles to preserve both the authenticity of His divine presence and His corresponding power. And the all important conclusion, "out of which there is no ordinary possibility of salvation (and do note the qualifier "ordinarily" as related to a mediated vs. immediate presence of God unto salvation as ultimately predicated upon divine sovereignty).

This organic and fleshed out local congregation (the church as we see it) is united to other congregations in its universal catholicity in so far as each congregation shares in the apostolic design together (the church as God sees it). While no church is infallible in its conformity to the prescribed pattern, the visible church is described in scripture as no less than "the body of Christ, the *fullness* of him who fills all in all."⁵ Paul even goes so far as to describe this activity as "a holy temple and a dwelling place of God."

And the question is raised-- what exactly is being transacted in this localized presence of Christ?

The historic consensus is that through the local body of Christ "all saints (Christians) are united to Jesus Christ their head, by his Spirit" such as to "have fellowship with HIM in his graces." It further clarifies how this fellowship in Christ's graces (mystery) is "being united to one another in love" such as to have "communion in each others gifts and graces... both in the inward and outward man" (Manners).⁶

Notice especially the sacramental language "communion" and "inward and outward" and "united to"

³ We should keep in mind that we are not the first generation of Christians to be reading our Bible. A survey of Christian consensus reveals an amazing continuity in interpretation within the historical mainstream. One such summary, notwithstanding its own idiosyncrasies relative others, is the 350 year old Westminster Confession of Faith ("WCF"). It broadly representing the traditions expressed by St. Augustine, Luther and Calvin for instance and will be utilized here.

⁴ WCF 25.2

⁵ Eph 1:23. Some have confused this passage as referencing the so called "invisible" church. Notwithstanding a misunderstanding of "invisible" (as if "unorganized" and not gathered) Paul's use of the same language in Ephesians 4 relative to local ministry and in context of Eph 2:19ff in relation to a "temple" conception of the church proves otherwise.

⁶ WCF 26.1

and “by His Spirit!” The convergence of Sacraments to sacramental manners (fleshed out nature to efficacious grace) is starting to emerge—and it has to do with flesh and blood, local life on life, community wherein the outward and the inward converge! The key is Christ’s *local* necessity as related to sacramental efficacy, the more local the better!⁷

The visual and carnal that is connected to “Christ’s Spirit” appears again in Westminster’s description of the sacraments:

There is, in every sacrament, a spiritual relation, or sacramental union, between the sign and the thing signified: whence it comes to pass, that the names and effects of the one are attributed to the other. ⁸

To be clear, the “things signified” refer to the saving benefits of partaking in the life of Christ. These graces are described in phrases like “engrafting into Christ” “remission of sins” (Baptism)⁹, “spiritual nourishment and growth” and “members of the mystical body of Christ” (Lord’s Supper)¹⁰. The “signs” “effect” the “things signified” and vice-versa.

Does this mean getting baptized makes you a Christian, and participation in the Lord’s Supper renews us as Christians? The consensus is Yes and No. The sacramental convergence of the sign and things signified are qualified with the equivalent of “not necessarily and not necessarily immediately, but ordinarily” as ultimately predicated upon divine election as received by saving faith alone (further defined as “assenting, receiving and resting”).¹¹

So it’s true. Just doing the sacraments doesn’t make one a Christian necessarily. And yet, the mystery of grace united to the sacramental manners is “ordinarily” a means of converting and renewing grace—baptism and Lord’s Supper respectively. And yet, the power is in the convergence of Sacramental and sacramental manners! Westminster even goes so far as to clarify that the converting/renewing power of Christ’s presence is NOT in, with or under the signatory elements of the sacraments themselves, but is “spiritually present.” Grace IS conferred, ordinarily!¹²

Fifth century Augustine spoke of the sacramental convergence of mystery to fleshed out manners this way:

The Word was made flesh, and dwelled among us; to that flesh is joined the church, and there is made the *total Christ*, head and body. ¹³

Augustine’s point is that the significance of the Eucharist is more than a moral example or memorial. Neither is Christ’s human presence located in the sacramental elements themselves (he even scoffs at this option!).¹⁴ Instead, Augustine believed the visible and organically socialized particular church is

⁷ John 14-17 with special attention to the “I in you and you in me” as related to all “one anothering.”

⁸ WCF 27.1

⁹ WCF 28.1

¹⁰ Lord’s Supper- c.f. WCF 29.1

¹¹ WCF 28.5-6, WCF 14.2.

¹² WCF 27.3

¹³ St. Augustine, *On the Epistle of John* 1.2.

¹⁴ *Homilies in John*, Tractate 26, Sec. 11. “For even we receive visible food: but the sacrament is one thing, the virtue of the

mystically united to Christ and his transformative grace. Augustine continues:

Let us rejoice and give thanks that we are made not only Christians, but Christ. Do you understand, brothers, and apprehend the grace of God upon us? Marvel, be glad, we are made Christ. For if he is the head, we are the members: the whole man is he and we... The fullness of Christ, then, is head and members. Head and members, what is that? Christ and the Church.¹⁵

Echoing Augustine's "Total Christ" idea, John Calvin in *Treatise on the Lord's Supper*, explained,

All the benefits which we should seek in the Supper is annihilated if Jesus Christ be not there given to us as the substance and foundation of all... Thus it is with the communion, which we have in the body and blood of the Lord Jesus. It is a spiritual mystery that can neither be seen by the eye nor comprehended by the human understanding.

Hard to understand—yes, and only through the eyes of faith. Hard to do? Not by the gracious condescension of our Lord through the sacramental manners. Again in the words of John Calvin,

We must confess then, that as the internal substance of the sacrament is conjoined with the visible signs and the bread is distributed to us by hands, so the body of Christ is communicated to us in order that we may be made partakers of it.¹⁶

Did you notice "by hands?" Our mystic communion with Christ is mediated through the "one anothering" and organization of corporal hands that pertain to it? Here again, there is a spiritual relation between the sign (elements distributed within the socio-cultural context of "hands") and "things signified" (the life of Christ) wherein *mystery* converges upon *manners* and we are "made partakers of Christ." What else then could Paul mean when he states:

The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because there is one bread, we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread.¹⁷

The not so subtle turn from partaking of Christ as related to consuming the body of Christ is clearly referencing the visible church. However catholic and universal, it's always *local*.

This then is the *mystery* of the sacraments wherein Calvin concludes that "the *substance of the sacraments is the Lord Jesus, and the efficacy of them the graces and blessings which we have by his means.*"¹⁸

By way of illustration:

sacrament another... he that dwelleth not in Christ, and in whom Christ dwelleth not, doubtless neither eateth His flesh [spiritually] nor drinketh His blood [although he may press the sacrament of the body and blood of Christ carnally and visibly with his teeth

¹⁵ St. Augustine, *Homilies on the Gospel of John*, In. lo. XXI.8).

¹⁶ John Calvin, *Treatise of the Lord's Supper*, 17.

¹⁷ 1Cor 10:16-17 ESV, c.f. 1 Peter 1:4, John 14, 17

¹⁸ *Treatise...*, 17.

Consider the power of gospel grace as an electrical circuit. An electrical circuit needs a circular pathway for the electrons to flow through it in order to work. The battery or other power source creates the voltage that makes the electrons move around the circle. But it's only effective when the wires that go from the power source are connected to both recipient (light bulb) and power source (battery) in one continuous motion.

If Christ's presence unto salvation (power source) is to impact us (recipients), it must necessarily flow by means of the Holy Spirit (electrons), through the Sacraments (wires) into the socio-cultural flesh and hands of the people of a particular and local church (light bulb), and then back again by the Holy Spirit (electrons), through wires (Sacraments) to Christ (power source). The whole circular system, and each of the connections (source, electrons, wires and recipient) are essential for the powerful effect—the sign in spiritual relation to the things signified, the *sacraments* made affective through sacramental *manners*.

Sacramental Manners: (Easy to Understand, Hard to do)

Flannery O'Connor wrote stories in an attempt to reconstruct the "outward signs" (local manners) to the "things signified" (inward grace). If the stories of sacramental manners in the church were told, I would suggest that they could be categorized in relation to both the manners of *participation* in worship and the manners of *localism* in one-anothering:

I. The Manners of Sacramental Participation In Worship:

There are basically two types of Christian services: One brings a person *TO* Christ and the gospel—known as the Revival Service (Band, Bible and Altar Call). The other *empowers* persons to *DO* the gospel by a participation in the life of Christ in a way hospitable to both seekers and believers both (a sacramental informed worship service)!¹⁹ In the former, a person is in the audience watching the dance. In the latter, the person is on the dance floor dancing. Our contention is that by the paradigm in Acts 2 and the whole of "temple spirituality," the latter is more biblical. At the very least, two inferences are obvious:

The first inference is to make sure every Christian worship service is sacramental by the weekly participation of the Lord's Supper and Baptism (when needed). The whole service then is oriented as informed by the sacrament principle that would stress participation vs. proclamation only. To do anything less is to experience less than "Total Christ."

As a converting or initiating sacrament, baptism in the context of participation in worship is given to those who are brought into the jurisdictional presence of Christ *in order to be saved*. This is expressed in the counsel of Peter for instance in Acts 2:38 and 1Peter 3:21. More than a witness or testimony, Christian baptism is a means of grace leading to salvation! This is the sacramental mystery of baptism merely applied to the "manner" of doing it after the principle already surveyed.

Those who are under the jurisdiction of Christ (even if by virtue of being under the jurisdiction of an adult who is) but not yet in possession of saving faith (assenting, receiving, resting in the gospel) are the proper recipients of Christian baptism in order to be saved! Baptized children are considered

¹⁹ Even Seekers who abstain from the Lord's table as a act of conscience and searching are still "tasting").

Christians outwardly, awaiting personal or inward confirmation of self-discerned faith as related to the life of Christ. This faith is individually discovered and tested before a person should partake of the confirming/renewing sacraments of the Lord's Supper."²⁰

As a renewing sacrament, the Lord's Supper is a "weekly" event by apostolic design. This is paradigmatically illustrated in the worship of Acts. The sacraments of both Christian baptism and the Lord's supper together with sermons, prayers (sung and spoken) and "one anothering" in Acts 2:42ff. And in Acts 20:7, it is even explained that "on the first day of the week (Sunday), Christian's gathered (organized) together with the intentional "in order to break bread." That the Lord's Supper was an essential element of Christian worship is expected given the Lord's instructions to the apostles about their post-ascension gatherings and his admonishment "do this (Eucharist) in remembrance of me" (John 6).

The second inference concerning sacramental worship is to carefully follow the Biblical manner of participating vs. just declaring in the gospel presence of Christ in worship. For this to happen, we follow the logic of temple worship, which is also the four-movement logic of the gospel itself renewed. The four-movement service is also expressed in the heavenly worship of Rev. 4-5. The movements are meant to empower the worshiper to participate in the life of Christ in the midst of the congregation and to experience (vs. just hear about) the transformational experience of the gospel. The Four movements of sacramental worship are:

- Movement of rediscovering God's glory and rightful claim over our lives through Invocation and praise.
- Movement of Reapplying God's grace and forgiveness through confession of sin and absolution.
- Movement of Renewal in the mediated Word become flesh through a priestly sermon (see below) leading to a reaffirmation of faith and celebration of the Lord's Supper.
- Movement of Recommitment to Christ's lordship (coronation) and the final blessing of receiving our king and savior's Benediction (a covenant blessing, not to be confused with a commissioning or even doxology).

II. The Manners of Sacramental Localism in One Anothering:

In Augustine's "Total Christ" spirituality, the heart of sacramental manners is the mystery of Christ being united to the specific socio-cultural flesh of local one anothering as carefully designed by the apostles with Christ as the cornerstone. For instance:

Localism Applied To Worship:

The manner of doing the four movements of worship must necessarily be localized into the socio-cultural flesh of the people for it to be fully sacramental. While the four movements are prescribed in scripture by apostolic design, the cultural *forms* that flesh out these elements are left to the discretion of the local congregation and its leaders, even if directed by scripture. How much of the worship is verbally scripted vs. unscripted, liturgically formal vs. informal, one or another genres of music and use of instruments--these are all necessarily fleshed out *and* informed by the local socio-

²⁰ 1Cor.11:28-29

cultural identity of a particular congregation. The criteria of “media fit the message” is necessarily a local determination depending on local, socio-cultural associations. What constitutes “sacred” sounds as related to the whole range of emotions that are fitting a four movement service is inherently local!

Localism Applied to the Sermon:

A “sermon” isn’t really (sacramentally speaking) a sermon unless it is live within the context of a local congregation in time and place. Only local worship transacts the mystery of “Word become flesh” wherein Christ is mediately present by the Holy Spirit in the flesh of the people. There is a necessary *priestlyness* to a sermon that transacts the God-humanward AND human-Godward movements of Christ descending-ascending (Eph 4) in worship. Virtual sermons detached from the unique narrative that is experienced in the context of a specific congregation just isn’t a sermon. It may be a very helpful and informative talk about Christian faith and/or practice, but it is not a transaction in the mystery of Christ in the midst of us, or within the context of the gospel in worship as tied to the manners of a local people. The sermon is related less to personalities and more to office, a “priest with no name” that directs people to the transcendent presence of Christ become flesh in a sermon.

The result? Walter Brueggemann, describes a sermon as an event wherein God’s word is mediated by the local preacher as the, “*Ready, steady, surprising proposal that the real world in which God invites us to live is not the one made available by the rulers of this age... a voice that shatters settled reality and evokes new possibilities.*”²¹ And for this to happen, it must be localized in a site-specific way as to embody the vernacular and vocational habits, sins, idols and dreams related to the living flesh of the people. As the pastor listens to all the words, and observes all the patterns of life that are throughout the week, his office is transformed and expressed in the holy conversation of a sacramental sermon.

Localism Applied to “One-Anothering:”

16th century reformer Martin Luther described the mystery and manners of sacramental convergence with graphic imagery:

Even as we have eaten and drunk the body and blood of Christ the Lord, we in turn permit ourselves to be eaten and drunk, and say the same words to our neighbor, Take, eat and drink; and this by no means in jest, but in all seriousness, meaning to offer yourself with all your life, even as Christ did with all that he had, in the sacramental words.²²

The transformative power of grace is unleashed in concrete and real ways in/with/through the one-anothering manners of the people. This is done in many ways in the life of a localized church and often taken for granted. It happens when someone ventures to expose their own brokenness or sin and discovers acceptance and compassion. Or when a meal is delivered in the presence of a church at a wake in support of the grieving. It involves the countless “lay counseling” that is happening on in a phone conversation or over coffee. It involves picnics and celebrations. It is intentional, and

²¹ Walter Brueggemann in his *Finally comes the Poet, Daring Speech for Proclamation* p.3, p. 5.

spontaneous. And all together, this *one-anothering* becomes the very sacramental presence of Christ that is celebrated in Acts 2:

And all who believed were together and had all things in common. And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need. And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day by day those who were being saved.

Localism applied to Mission:

Edmund Clowney describes the Biblical conception of the church this way:

The organic concept that appears in the New Testament... is defined not by one earthly hierarchical center nor by many earthly congregational centers, but by a heavenly center that requires multiform earthly manifestations. Earthly assemblies do not define but manifest the nature and the center of the church."²³

A sacramental missiology as applied to growing the church would want to favor a multi-congregational method of church growth vs. mega-church method or even multi-site method (many congregations with virtual or itinerate sermons). The multi-congregational strategy consists of many small congregations organically united to other congregations within a geographically related region such as together to be "one big church." These united congregations share a unified financial plan (in multi-congregational expressions), a Confession of Faith (perhaps in multiple-forms), the four movements of worship (expressed in multiple cultural forms/styles) a shared government consisting of representatives from each congregation forming one "city-governing board or "session." This "Total Christ" spirituality of mission has the advantage of expressing both local and global aspects of a church movement fleshed out in multiple vernaculars but organically connected in mutually inter-dependent ways.

A multi-congregational approach provides all the practical advantages of a big church through various cooperatives while retaining a small church feel. The sacramental result of this "manner" of mission is that the body of Christ is necessarily clothed within a socio-cultural "flesh" that is brilliantly multi-form in cultural diversity, as related to Christ's humanity in the midst of us. Christ's divinity is at once mono-elemental in theological consensus and multi-cultural across social difference. To do otherwise risks one cultural form inadvertently oppressing the cultural form of another to the demise of sacramental efficacy. While all cultures are equal, not all are the same. There is a necessary limit to how far one culture can accommodate another without reducing the local element of culture necessary to sacramental manner in mission.

Conclusion:

Thomas Trotter observed how,

²³ Edmund Clowney, *Distinctives of the Presbyterian Polity*

The setting of Flannery O'Connor's stories is a world from which human beings have generally eliminated mystery (grace) only discover the power of that reality in sudden, startling, and unexpected ways.

Trotter continues,

Half of her characters are hopelessly sentimental and half are obscene lunatics. Neither are aware of the presence of grace in the world.²⁴

I fear the setting of O'Connors stories are too often the reality today even among those who aspire to become gospel centered. In our noble and global pursuits we often neglect the power of local, carnal, and therefore, *mediated* divine presence. There are the Sacraments. And there are the sacramental manners that flesh them out into spiritual reality. Reunited, there is a relation between the mystery of grace and efficacious power that is *present* in, with and through, the local manners of gospel grace. When mystery is fleshed out Calvin wrote, "No extent of space interferes with the boundless energy of the Spirit, which transfuses life into us from the flesh of Christ."²⁵

²⁴ Thomas Trotter, Flannery O'Connor: Her Vision, Religion Online, (<http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=3600>)

²⁵ John Calvin, *Corpus Reformatorum*, 37: 48