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A JOURNAL FOR THE
CONTEMPORARY CHURCH

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Education in the Catholic
Tradition

Columba McCann
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to Ourselves? A Test Case
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The Furrow

A pastoral monthly founded 1950.

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Novate vobis novale
Et nolite serere super spinas.
Yours to drive a new furrow,
Nor sow any longer among the briers.

Editor: Pádraig Corkery, St Patrick's College, Maynooth. E-mail: editor.furrow@spcm.ie (for editorial enquiries, typescripts etc).

Rates: Single copy €4.50 (including VAT) and postage: Rep. of Ireland €2/Elsewhere €2.90). Annual Subscription: Republic of Ireland €75.00. Northern Ireland and Great Britain Stg£70.00/€75.00. Foreign: €90.00/\$106/Stg£84.00. Student rate €50.00/\$56.00/Stg£46.00. If you wish to avail of our *online* subscription please follow this link: <https://thefurrow.ie/register/> Subscriptions are payable in advance to the Secretary, The Furrow, St Patrick's College, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Telephone (01) 7083741; Fax (01) 7083908 (Codes: National 01; International +353-1). E-mail: furrow.office@spcm.ie Website: www.thefurrow.ie. Subscriptions can be paid by cheque or online through The Furrow website.

Single articles can be purchased and downloaded from our website: www.thefurrow.ie.

Back numbers and advertising rates available from the Secretary.

The Furrow's bank is the Allied Irish Bank, Maynooth, Co. Kildare. Bank Giro Code No. 93-32-01.

Back issues of *The Furrow* are available on microfilm from: ProQuest Information & Learning Co., 300 North Zeeb Road, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48106, U.S.A., and JSTOR.

The Furrow is published by The Furrow Trust and edited at St Patrick's College, Maynooth. The views expressed in its pages are in no way attributable to the College authorities. The Furrow is printed in the Republic of Ireland at Naas Printing Ltd., Naas, Co. Kildare.

‘This Little Heart of Mine’: Education in the Catholic Tradition

Michael A. Conway

What is it that characterizes a Catholic school? What is essential in such a school? What is it that marks it out? These are important foundational questions in understanding the activity, the structures, and the expectations that go with faith schools. There is much that might be said in response to these questions. I’d like to explore what I believe to be not only the heart of a Catholic school, but that which characterizes its essential contribution to contemporary culture. And let me add immediately that this is not over against other schools, but, hopefully, in conversation and in cooperation with them. I hope that what I have to say will underline the precise privilege that it is to work in a Catholic school, and the great potential that our schools harbour in terms of the rich contribution that they might make to society. I am only sketching a response from within my own competence as someone, who reflects on faith in contemporary culture; and in no way do I wish to tell you how you ought to work in the classroom; that is your own professional skill and experience; but my hope is that you might find it helpful to transform something of what I will suggest into lived experience and practice. And it is in that spirit that I stand before you; not as someone with answers, but as someone who wishes to open, possibly, new horizons.¹

THE SIGNIFIER ‘CATHOLIC’

I’d like to speak first about the word ‘catholic,’ which I think is one of the finest words in the vocabulary of religious faith and identity. However, I am sometimes reticent about using it because it is so easily misunderstood, and it is so often used abusively in many circles. The signifier ‘catholic’ is sometimes used, and especially in educational circles, in a manner that does not honour even the

¹ This is an abridged version of a lecture given to the Annual R.E. Seminar (Inter-Diocesan), *Carlow College, St. Patrick’s*, Carlow, 3 March 2022.

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literal integrity of the word.² Etymologically, the word comes from the Greek, *κατά* (*kata*) and *ὅλον* (*holon*), meaning literally, ‘according to the whole.’ Now if the word is used reductively to designate a limited cohort of people, or a separated group in society, or a prescriptive set of ideas, or a particular range of beliefs, it is in a fundamental contradiction with what it signifies. The word itself is being abused; or there is a slight of hand at play that masks other forces that are behind the use of the word. It means, as I say, according to the whole, *kata-holon*, and, therefore, *according to the mystery*. Any principle of limitation in the use of the word is always, already a deep betrayal of *that* mystery.

It is particularly disturbing when the word is used as a principle of exclusion; and it is scandalous, even, when this is done in the name of Christian faith.³ It can never be used with integrity in that way. In a particularly egregious form, the word is used to designate a system of beliefs or truths, whose acceptance supposedly secures a faith identity in contra-distinction to others. This would mean that a Catholic school, for example, is a place of explicit (or, more usually, implicit) exclusion, sometimes imaginary, sometimes literally, making it a supposed ‘privileged’ place in the landscape of the human condition. It suggests a closed locus of identity, that secures one’s position in a tradition of faith. On so many levels this is problematic. It is a false understanding of tradition, rooted in a misguided reading of revelation, and lived out in a theologically deficient ecclesiology. It generates fear of the other and of otherness, arrogance in the self, and alienates young, emerging persons from the full lived reality and richness of Catholic faith. Speaking recently to the De La Salle Brothers, gathered for their General Chapter, Pope Francis said: ‘You educate to responsibility, creativity, coexistence, justice, and peace. You educate to the interior life, to be open to the transcendent dimension, to the sense of wonder and contemplation in the face of the mystery of life and creation. You live all this and interpret it in Christ and translate it into the fullness of humanity.’⁴

2 The signifier ‘catholic’ can be used in multiple ways in different contexts. For the sake of this discussion, I am dealing with the substantial form or expression. For a treatment of the juridical usage, for example, see Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ Nos. 54-58; https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccatheduc/documents/rc_con_ccatheduc_doc_20220125_istruzione-identita-scuola-cattolica_en.html (accessed 25 May 2022).

3 The Congregation for Catholic Education warns against a too ‘narrow’ understanding of the model of a Catholic school that contradicts the vision of an ‘open’ Catholic school (see Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 72). See also, *ibid.*, Nos. 68-71.

4 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-de-la-salle-brothers-world-needs-new-pact-on-education.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

CHARACTERISING A *CATHOLIC* SCHOOL

What is it, then, that characterizes a *catholic* school? A Catholic school is a school that lives, breathes, and welcomes according to the whole, the *kata-holon*; in other words, in view of the mystery. But what does that mean? It means a multitude of things; but I’d like to go straight to what is the essential. A catholic school is a school that is marked by openness to the mystery. And this translates directly into it being a place that is open to, and that welcomes *the other*.

A school in the Catholic tradition is a place, where any established identity always and immediately gives way to difference; where bounded community always and immediately welcomes the stranger; where the household is always and immediately responsible for the adjoining neighbour, where hospitality always and immediately takes precedence over hostility, and where God is always and immediately welcomed through the other. A school that is deeply Catholic in its Christianity is a school that welcomes the greatest possible spectrum of otherness, extending to the divine, the transcendent, *the Other*. You could say that it is open along a horizontal axis to the *other*, the neighbour, and along a vertical axis to the *Other* (majuscule), the divine; *and these are inseparable*. A Catholic school is not a place that closes its doors, but one that opens them again and again and again through time and human history. In the recent Instruction from the *Congregation for Catholic Education*, entitled ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ we read: ‘The Church’s educational proposal is not only addressed to her children, but also to “all peoples [to promote] the complete perfection of the human person, the good of earthly society and the building of a world that is more human.”’⁵ The Catholic school is marked by a commitment to welcoming, encouraging, enabling, and being supportive of the other. Recently, too, Pope Francis observed that given that our time is ‘marked by so many social, political and even health-related tensions,’ there is a growing temptation to consider the other person as ‘a stranger or an enemy.’ This, he says, denies the real dignity of the other. Against this, he stresses that the Church, ‘from the very beginning of her mission’ has always proclaimed the unconditional value of the human person.⁶ He remarked, further, to the De La Salle

5 Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 13 (note that the internal citation is from the Second Vatican Council, Declaration on Christian Education, *Gravissimum educationis*, No. 3).

6 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-01/pope-francis-discourse-congregation-doctrine-faith.print.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

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Brothers: ‘Indeed, you are on the frontline in educating to pass from a closed to an open world; from a throwaway culture to a culture of care; from pursuing partisan interests to pursuing the common good.’⁷

This welcoming of the other is not merely to be understood in the terms of being friendly and ‘nice’ in that conventional sense of civilized, social exchange and politeness. No. It’s welcoming their very otherness as a gift or a richness for the self. Again, Pope Francis has remarked: ‘In the history of every person, the Father sees again the story of his Son who came down to earth. Every human story has an irrepressible dignity.’⁸

I think that religion teachers have a very important role to play in connecting this charism of openness toward the other to faith identity and enabling young people in understanding that this is not accessory or incidental but is at the very heart of Catholic identity. Indeed, the Instruction that I just mentioned pointed out that ‘the Catholic school prepares pupils to exercise their freedom responsibly, forming an attitude of openness and solidarity.’⁹ The other is valued in being other. And there can be no question of rejecting, or converting, or denigrating the other’s identity (no matter what it might be). This is the real challenge and privilege of a Catholic school: to be Catholic is to live, and work, and hope according to the whole, the universal, the mystery of God among us in Christ.

This is to nourish one’s own Catholic identity as an identity that is open, that welcomes the Other/other and responds to the other as part of one’s own self-understanding. I’m not saying anything here that you don’t, to some degree, already know. On *Nationwide*, recently, there was a report on a wonderful initiative in Mount Sion Secondary School in Waterford Diocese. The school has become what’s termed a ‘school of sanctuary’ for students, who are coming to Ireland from all kinds of complex backgrounds, many traumatic, where they are welcomed, supported, and educated so that they might come to be integrated healthily into Irish society as valued members of our communities.¹⁰ The school now has 37 nationalities and belongs in that great tradition of Edmund Rice. In the interview, the Deputy Principal, Bill Doherty, said: ‘we

7 <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-de-la-salle-brothers-world-needs-new-pact-on-education.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

8 Pope Francis, ‘Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 54th World Communications Day,’ https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papa-francesco_20200124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html (accessed 25 May 2022).

9 Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 16.

10 Documentary, RTÉ, 17 January 2022.

have found our heart and our soul again! It’s an extraordinary statement. And the School Sanctuary Leader, Narrell Byre, said that ‘we have found our mission again. We welcome all faiths and no faith.’ And strikingly, she told us that on Fridays Muslim students are released to go to the mosque for prayer and they come back afterwards to continue with their day’s schooling. That is a credible Catholic school in the best sense of the word. A Catholic school is not a place of uniformity, conformism, and platitude, but a place of diversity, of difference (in every sense), of dialogue, of intellectual rigour, and of creativity. And this, in the name of faith for those, who belong explicitly to the Catholic faith community; and this, in view of faith for those who follow any one of the many diverse paths in life.¹¹

There is one thing, however, that I would quibble with, and that is the very *need* to designate the school as a ‘school of sanctuary.’ Why? Surely, every Catholic school should be a school of sanctuary. Surely, no matter who knocks on the door, they should be welcomed. Surely, every Catholic school should be a safe place for every student. A Catholic school should be a school of sanctuary for the believing student, for the searching student, for the agnostic student, for the atheist student, for the LGBTIQ+ student, for the lost student, for the vulnerable student, for the migrant student, for your son or daughter, for your niece or nephew, for your grandchild, and, even, (and this might be a surprising one) for your own inner child.¹² We need to ensure that there is no safer place for our humanity than in our schools. Everyone should know explicitly that this is the Catholic ethos of our schools. And, surely, all parents or guardians – no matter what their personal convictions might be – should know and understand that their son or daughter is in a safe place, when they attend a Catholic school; and this on every level, body, mind, spirit, and soul (even if they do not recognize these last two categories). When a Catholic school works, and lives, and breathes in such a spirit, they are a mighty witness to the magnanimity of the Christian faith, to service of the other, to a real openness that mirrors transcendence, and that gracefully reflects the love that God has communicated to each one of us through his Son. As teachers of religion in a Catholic faith school, this is the foundational vision, and it is your privilege to translate this into the structures, processes, and exchanges of day-

11 See Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 28.

12 On the importance of being mindful of LGBTIQ+ students, see Pope Francis’s letter to Fr. James Martin, SJ. For the relevant information, see <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/pope/news/2022-05/pope-letter-fr-martin-lgbt-outreach-questions.html> (accessed 25 May 2022).

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to-day life in your classroom and, even, out into the wider school community.

May I go back very briefly to the issue of different religions and none. Given the diversity in our present culture, Catholic schools should not be mono-religious if they are to be genuinely *catholic* schools. If they are mono-religious (or predominantly so), then they are likely to be replicating the dynamics of a religious sect, which defines itself and affirms its identity over against other persons and other groups in the culture. It does not welcome difference, and it may well believe that it is the only space of redemption.

It must, however, be said that a Christian cannot say that all religions are equal. This would be dishonest and would not be in conformity with the truth of the Gospel, where Christ is recognized to be the one and only mediator.¹³ But if I boast of this, to say, or even think, that ‘I am better than someone else,’ then that is a monstrosity. It is condescending toward the other and embarrassingly arrogant of the self. It is, in fact, precisely because ‘I belong to the Catholic faith’ that I can say to a Muslim, or a Buddhist, or an atheist: ‘You, yes you, are, perhaps, closer to God than me!’¹⁴ It is so important to understand this; and if you don’t understand it, you have not understood the *catholicity* of Christian faith. There is no difficulty about saying this, precisely in the name of faith: ‘you, may be closer to God, our loving Father, than I am.’ And, once you recognize this, it is immensely liberating. This invites one to be more deeply Christian in one’s faith-life, to be more firmly catholic, and, at the same time, to be more generously open. This is what you find at the heart of Christianity; the more that you are rooted in Catholic faith – with all that it brings in terms of singularity and surprise – the more that you are open to the universal, the whole, the kata-holon. Recently, Pope Francis said that the church must be a ‘church with open doors.’¹⁵ A Catholic school must not have closed doors and, in particular, it does not close its doors to any group in society. There may be principles of limitation in terms of school numbers, etc., but any such principles must apply to everyone, equally and at absolutely no cost to anyone’s personal identity.¹⁶ The idea that a Catholic school is reserved to a particular group in society is a tragic contradiction of what it is to be a community of Christian faith that serves the

13 See *Dei verbum*, no. 2.

14 See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Dieu, un détour inutile ?* Entretiens avec Dominique Saint-Macary et Pierre Sinizergues (Paris : Du Cerf, 2020), 86-87.

15 <https://www.ncregister.com/news/pope-francis-the-church-is-called-to-be-a-church-with-open-doors>

16 And even in such a situation, the limitation itself is subject to the preferential option for the poor.

universal redemptive order (or in more theological language, that is the sacrament of salvation).

THE CLASSROOM AND THE RELIGION TEACHER

I’d like to talk a little about the religion teacher and the classroom because to be in the classroom is to be in a very unusual place in our culture (and we rarely reflect on it). In fact, it’s a precarious kind of place. There are tectonic plates moving all around you, and teachers are on the fault lines, so to speak. I’m going to call the precise place of the classroom an ‘inbetween’ because it is neither here nor there. I must add, immediately, that my inspiration here is Plato and not the TV programme, ‘The Inbetweeners.’

Plato used the term *μεταξύ* (*metaxy* or *metaxis*) to describe the condition of “in-betweenness,” which, for him, is one of the characteristics of being human. And, much later, speaking of the school, Hannah Arendt sees its importance and its vitality in being a special kind of institution that is placed between the private domain of the home and the public domain of the world. It is that place, where the child or young person can make the transition from the intimacy of the family home to the rough and tumble of life in the wider world.¹⁷ As an ‘inbetween’ the classroom might be best characterised as being ‘neither one, nor the other’: neither the home, nor the world; neither the past, nor the future; neither the parent, nor the politician; neither the child, nor the adult; neither the believer, nor the unbeliever; neither certainty, nor scepticism; neither the rigorist, nor the anarchist, and so on. Teachers, and especially RE teachers, live the ‘inbetween’ in a way that is unique in our culture. And that is your art; you stand and persevere in the ‘inbetween,’ when others would be tempted to move to one of the complementary poles. It is precisely such a place that encourages and promotes growth in mind and spirit, while staying firmly rooted in the life and world of the young person. It engenders freedom, while providing guidance and protection; it encourages growth and movement, while giving support and sustenance; it heals and nurtures, while being proactive and discrete; it fosters, and does not limit; it leads, and does not control; and so on. It is vital to recognize this condition of being ‘inbetween’ and the energy that goes with it.

As teachers this is your place, too; and a special kind of responsibility and privilege goes with being there. I would hazard saying that it is even a greater privilege to be a *religion* teacher in

17 See Hannah Arendt, ‘The Crisis in Education,’ in *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London, Penguin, 1993), 173-96, at 188-89.

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that space. For Plato the ultimate characterization of the state of ‘inbetweenness’ is a spirituality, whereby we humans recognize that we are suspended between the human and the divine.¹⁸ And religion teachers, more than any other, honour this more wholesome horizon of the human condition in the school. In many ways you could say that the most significant journey of transition in this ‘inbetween’ is the *journey of the soul* that each student will make during these school years. This is so since it is during these years that as a young person you begin to become conscious of your own identity as unique to you, as being independent, as being free and self-determining. As part of this journey, you discover, importantly, the foundations of your interior life, where faith-life begins to blossom as a personal discovery, as an appropriation, and as a commitment. What this means for the teacher, more than anything else, is that you must trust in God at work in every person’s life. For the young person, this is very often a lonesome journey; but a necessary one, that mirrors each person’s journey into God.

The paradox of this ‘inbetween’ for the teacher of religion is that you strive to give ‘direction,’ and, yet, you know that you cannot give ‘directives.’ God’s spirit is always there before you and will be there after you. You never come first; you never stand in that primary place that is the other’s interiority, and to attempt to do so is spiritual abuse. When young people begin to discover this mystery for themselves, this gift of the interior life, then, they are being equipped magnificently in facing the journey and the challenges of life. And they can only discover that interior gift if you know when to step back and allow it to emerge with integrity for them. Your task is one of enabling, facilitating, and opening possibilities.

This is genuinely a challenge. Teaching in religious education and working in faith development calls, in many ways, for more not less. And when I say ‘challenge,’ I don’t mean it in that euphemistic sense, whereby it is used especially in public discourse to avoid the word ‘problem.’ Religious education is *not* a problem. On the contrary, it is one of the most exciting things that you could possibly do in life. But it is a challenge for everyone; and it’s a challenge in the best sense of that word; you, too, grow, learn, and expand, when you take up this challenge. You promote newness of life, growth, and contribute to engendering the future. Young people do not want experts, and they do not want answers. And this is true even when they look for them; *what they want, and need, is to learn how to*

18 We humans are suspended on a web of polarities: the one and the many, eternity and time, freedom and fate, instinct and intellect, risk and safety, love and hate, to name but a few.

answer their own questions. The temptation is to short circuit this process and give them pre-prepared, ready-made, and (necessarily) relatively trite responses. But when you do that, you destroy their emerging interiority. That is why so often conscientious silence can be very powerful; it allows the real response to emerge from the young mind and heart that is beginning the adventure of life. And in such a case, affirmation is all that is required.

What young people need in the religious education classroom more than anything else are people, who are competent and who care. And people who care try and try again; they do not give up, or abandon, or resign to indifference. *It is the journey that matters.* Young people respond best to care for them, while respecting them, on the one hand, and, on the other, giving them the space that they might need to find their own way. A Catholic school has the breath to facilitate this because it is open always to the whole, to the infinite, to the mystery.

THE TENSIONS OF TEACHING

I’d like, now, ever so briefly, to step into the classroom. The moment that you acknowledge the transcendent, God, the infinite, the loving father of us all, then, you are thrown into a foundational relativity.¹⁹ Nothing, nor no one, can take the place of God; and everything that we do and say is relative to that centre point. And this means that relativity is not a bad word. On the contrary, it reflects the fundamental human relationship to the transcendent as our origin, and as the only absolute. It is humanizing in the deepest Christian sense, and it acknowledges, implicitly, our need for redemption.

In the classroom there is a particular expression of this relativity, which can be characterised, schematically, as a quadrangle (let me call it, the matrix of relativity), whereby the corner points are marked out as follows:

| | |
|---------------------------------|---------------------|
| Young person (as student) | Parents / Guardians |
| Your own person (as teacher) | Church as Community |

In this matrix of relativity, the four corners are always relative to one another; they do not stand independently of each other in the

¹⁹ The moment you use the word relativity, you implicitly imply, equally, the word absolute. There is a mutuality, which is not a mirroring of equals.

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classroom.²⁰ As teacher, and especially as a teacher in religious education, you are called to negotiate and balance the tensions, the expectations, the demands, the agreements, the disagreements, the hopes, the fears, etc., in this relativity. And *this balancing is the work of love for your students*. To renege on this, is really to abandon them to competing forces, which are often beyond their capabilities at this point in the journey of life. Remember the classroom is an ‘inbetween.’

It is vital to see that you do this with the young person’s wellbeing as the priority in your deliberations, in whatever you might suggest, and in whatever action that you might need to take. This you do in your professional capacity, and I would hope that you have whatever institutional supports that you might need in doing this. It is, further, your dignity as a professional, as a person whose special responsibility is to care for the next generation, and, indeed, as a person of faith.

Inevitably, working in religious education raises questions about your own identity, faith-wise and otherwise; your own relationship to the transcendent, your own interior intimacy, and your own connection to the institutional expression of church (which may well be one of reservation, and even great reservation, given all that has come to light in the past number of years). No one should expect you to betray your interior forum when you stand in the classroom. There are, of course, appropriate boundaries, and I’m sure that you know, better than I, how to maintain them. It is, I believe, however, vital that you are true to yourself, especially with young persons, because they know when you are and when you are not. And the moment that they recognize that you, too, are on a journey, they will trust you, because you will mirror for them, what it is that they are beginning to discover, negotiate, and seek to live out.

Clearly, you should never say or do anything in the classroom that violates your own conscience, and when, for example, it is clear that your position differs from that, say, of parents or guardians, or the institutional expression of church (as you understand it), then it is important to communicate the relativity of the various positions.²¹ And, clearly, responding to a 14-year-old is not the same as responding to a 17-year-old. If you do not communicate

20 And each corner is marked by a living infinity that cannot be further reduced. Clearly, this matrix is limited to my consideration of the Catholic school and the classroom.

21 ‘Catholic Schools will respect the freedom of conscience of teachers in matters of personal religious belief and practice’ (Irish Episcopal Conference, *Share the Good News: National Directory for Catechesis in Ireland* (Dublin: Veritas, 2010), art. 151); See also Congregation for Catholic Education, ‘The Identity of the Catholic School for a Culture of Dialogue,’ No. 49.

within this matrix of relativity, then you are in danger of falling into an abuse of your position, and in doing so, doing yourself and others great damage. And young people themselves, in time, will realize this, when they themselves are adults and look back on their formative years.

BEHOLD THE FUTURE: *SYNODALITY*

The young person or child is *the* agent of change. We all know this; whoever has most influence over the child, whoever convinces the young person decides to a significant degree the future (that’s why people get so uptight about teachers and especially teachers of religion; about what they say and teach in the classroom, because it has a decisive influence on the future).

Of course, what we often forget is that it is not, in fact, the teacher that is the real point of power; it the young person that is the incarnation of the new. And a significant part of your task and responsibility is to protect the young person’s developing interior life from all who would seek to manipulate them to suit their own ends, who would try to secure their own future through them. You must do this in name of the dignity of each person, born in the image and likeness of God. You are a guardian in the special place that is the classroom, where the seeds of interiority are nurtured so that in time each young person might stand in adult freedom, and, looking back, will see that they were indeed nourished, cared for, protected, respected, and encouraged on their unique journeys of life and faith.

When you meet and engage with young people as I am suggesting, then, what you are really doing is teaching them, preparing them for, and showing them how to live together in difference, how to support one another, how to respect one another, and, ultimately, how to walk together. That is what Pope Francis means by *synodality*, and he tells us that is the major task for the Church in our present time. I’d like to give the last word to one of your students. It’s a poem called ‘Silver Chain’ by Chelsea Bowes, who is, I believe, a Junior Certificate Student.

Silver Chain
by Chelsea Bowes, St Kevin’s College

Silver, enchanting,
Full of memories that haunt me,
Beautifully detailed
With a long chain of ancestry.
Something so small,

THE FURROW

Holding generations of secrets
Young and old, good and bad.
From the Easter Rising to the twenty first century,
From all the people who have come before me,
Giving a sense of responsibility.
An honour it feels, entrusting me
With something so rich in history,
Of something so much bigger than me –
This little heart of mine.²²

22 This poem is taken from a collection by students participating in the 'We Write What We Like' project, supported by CDETBSCC (City of Dublin Education and Training Board Sports & Cultural Council) and JCSP (Junior Certificate Schools Programme), Poetry Ireland, <https://www.poetryireland.ie/education/poems-from-schools/> (accessed 25 January 2022). And St. Kevin's College is under the trusteeship of the Edmund Rice Schools Trust in Finglas, Dublin 11, Ireland.

God Talk. There is no doubting the fact that the divine appears differently to different people, even in the same situation. If I manage to make people feel safe enough to speak candidly, even in dogmatic religious groups, I am amazed how much variation there is in personal belief. To some, God is an impersonal force, to others personal, to some an energy, to others a being. Some people experience many gods and spirits, some only one.

– NICHOLAS PETER HARVEY and LINDA WOODHEAD, *Unknowing God: Toward a Post-Abusive Theology*, Cascade Books, 2022, p.6

Are We Talking to God or to Ourselves? A Test Case in Liturgical Orientation

Columba McCann

Cardinal Ratzinger, before he became pope, argued in his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* for the appropriateness of an ‘Eastern’ orientation of both priest and people in the celebration of Mass, the orientation which, with few exceptions, obtained in celebrations of the Tridentine Mass. The argument was more recently taken up by Cardinal Sarah, who argued for a return to this orientation. According to this way of thinking, when the priest celebrates facing the people, the danger is that the community becomes focussed in on itself instead of on God; and when all face the same direction, the community is united in its orientation beyond itself, in a gaze *towards* God.

I think there is indeed a question to be raised about where the focus is in our liturgies. In any true relationship there is a dialogue, a balance, a dancing between two opposite poles. It takes two to tango! The community is important; it is, after all, a sacramental sign of salvation, as Vatican II pointed out (*Sacrosanctum concilium*, 5). The presence of the community must be real: we must bring ourselves to the liturgy, and the liturgy should speak in such a way that our voices are heard. We have to be able, at least to some extent, to recognize ourselves in what is sung, said and done. On the other hand, we are in dialogue with God, who loved us first; otherwise we are just talking to ourselves. As with any loving relationship, we bring who we are but, in some way, let go of who we are (or who we think we are) in the face of the mystery of the Other. The liturgy should speak of God, and not just with words. The celebration should be a space that opens us up to moments of *epiphany*, moments of disclosure where God is encountered

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in Christ, through the action of the Holy Spirit. The dialogue is all the more mysterious because it has a Trinitarian shape. It is a Trinitarian dialogue, a manifestation of the ‘whole Christ’ (*totus Christus*), head and members, where the Holy Spirit has been poured into each of us so that, through, with and in Christ, we address the Father as sons and daughters of God. *How* might this best be realised when it comes to liturgical layout and orientation? There are, clearly, different views.

When it comes to prayer, I find something attractive about the tradition of facing East, something which, in Christianity, goes back as least as far as Origen (c. 184-253). The East is the place of the rising sun, a wonderful symbol of the resurrection found, for example, in the Book of Revelation (Rev 7:2). In the first book of the Bible, the East is the place of the Garden of Eden, the place where human beings walked with God and conversed with him. Looking to the East in prayer can be a vivid bodily expression of our hope in the resurrection and our desire to be with God and speak with God. I am also old enough to have happy childhood memories of Mass celebrated with the ‘Eastern’ orientation as the norm; and when I see pictures of this kind of celebration I do experience a nostalgia for something that did capture me as a child.

Recently I had the experience of attending daily Mass at a side chapel in the Basilica of St Mary Major in Rome. Mass was celebrated in the beautiful chapel containing the icon of the Blessed Virgin known as *Salus Populi Romani*, a shrine which Pope Francis visits when he can after trips abroad. The interweaving of art and architecture in this chapel is done with such skill that one can appreciate why a new altar facing the people was never installed. It simply could never hold its own in an environment where architectural lines, sculpture, stone plaster and gold leaf all conspire to lift one’s gaze to the actual wall of the chapel, and the altar beneath it. I attended Mass each day for nine days (by chance, a kind of novena!), and given the various factors mentioned above, was well disposed to discover that a celebration *ad orientem* would open me up to a deeper experience of the liturgy as an encounter with God, and not just a meeting of the community. But it *didn’t* happen. Perhaps it might have done so, if I had been very close to the altar, as altar server, concelebrant, or myself as presiding celebrant. As a ‘person in the pew’, I felt relatively cut off from what was happening.

There was a genuine warmth and gentle reverence about the priest who celebrated Mass each day. His manner welcomed and included us. He gave a brief introduction to the Mass and also a daily homily. When he prayed out loud he said the words clearly, and it seemed to me that he meant them. When we moved from

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the Liturgy of the Word to the Liturgy of the Eucharist, he prayed facing 'East' at the altar. I know enough about liturgical theology to know that he prayed not just for us but also in our name. And yet, the visual message that I picked up was that, really, what happened at the altar was mostly between God and him. I really did feel like something of a spectator and had to work harder to connect with what he was doing, even though his words were clearly amplified. It was as if he were doing something for our benefit (which he clearly was) but the notion that what was happening was really an act of the whole assembly (as taught in the Catechism CCC 1136-1144) was less clearly conveyed.

Clearly what I am describing is a personal experience, coloured by my own individual subjectivity, and therefore of only very limited validity in a more general discussion. And of course we can have 'off days' in the liturgy and in prayer, when nothing speaks to us and when we are, in some way lacking in sensitivity. Such periods are frequent enough for me, but I don't think they characterised those nine days.

A SACRIFICE IN THE FORM OF A MEAL

As I reflect on this experience, I remember a lecture given by renowned liturgical scholar Fr Ansgar Chupungco, OSB in Rome, some thirty or so years ago, where the question of liturgical orientation came up. My memory is that he appreciated fully the meaning of turning East for prayer and was all for it, but another consideration was *more* important when the liturgy in question was the Eucharist: the actual form in which the Eucharist was instituted.

Without attempting a huge exposition on the nature of the Eucharist, which would take many pages, I think it is safe to say that it is a celebration through which we participate in the sacrifice which is Christ's life, death, resurrection and sending of the Spirit. It is a memorial of his paschal mystery such that what is celebrated is present for us now in sacrament. But our participation in this sacrifice takes place in the form of a *meal*: 'When we eat this bread and drink this cup, we proclaim your death, O Lord, until you come again.' The dynamics of a meal both in human life generally and in biblical tradition more specifically (especially the earthly life of Jesus himself), are such that this dimension cannot be quietly passed over as relatively insignificant compared with the sacrifice in which we participate. The whole point is that it is through the sacramental sign that we enter into the theological reality. The sign of the meal cannot be by-passed, and the degree to which we fail to honour the sign may well be the degree to which we fail to enter into the theological reality it conveys: the sacrifice of Christ.

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If, given the accounts of the Eucharist and Eucharistic allusions in the New Testament, we must truly honour the form of the Eucharistic celebration as a meal, then the dynamics of human meal sharing suggest that we gather *around* the altar. I can't think of any life-giving human meal sharing where relative positioning of host, food and participants translates into something like the arrangement of a celebration of the Eucharist *ad orientem*, allowing even for the fact that this food operates on the level of symbol and is not about having a full meal in the ordinary sense. People simply don't share meals in this kind of layout, still less meals that are hugely significant. I hope that these lines don't come across as a denigrating of the sacrificial character of the Mass. My point here is that the fundamental ritual participation in the sacrifice is by way of the meal (cf. *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* art. 85), and that this has a significant bearing on liturgical orientation.

THE TRANSCENDENT GOD IN OUR MIDST

Getting back to my own personal experiences, I have to say that, in fact, I experience the Eucharistic Liturgy as encounter with *God* more vividly in the orientation that has become the norm *after* Vatican II. When the liturgy is celebrated well we don't have to find ourselves in an 'either/or' situation vis a vis God and the community: we discover in the Eucharist that God has come among us, that Christ is present and that we are members of his body, that 'heaven is wedded to earth'. The Holy, Other, Transcendent, is in our midst, and wonderfully so. God is among us, and yet beyond us at the same time. It's not just about whether the priest happens to have his back to the rest of us or not. At Glenstal Abbey, where I am a monk, the layout of nave and monastic choir is such that there is a very clear sense that the congregation, monks and others, is gathered *around* the altar. This usually necessitates that the presiding celebrant will have his back to at least some of the monks. When I am one of those at his back I don't feel any less part of what is happening, because we are all gathered around the altar. We are not spectators.

It is true that some priests experience some kind of pressure to 'perform' for people because they are facing them, something which did not obtain when they faced the other way and when their prayers were inaudible and in a foreign language. I think that in the orientation towards the people, there are problems where you find attempts on the part of priests to somehow 'dramatize' the prayers, or read them like newsreaders instead of praying to God, or intersperse them with commentary. In this kind of situation, for all his best efforts, and meant for the best of pastoral reasons, the

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priest may actually become a barrier rather than a facilitator of encounter with God. But we *don't* have to change the orientation in order to restore celebrative balance in these situations. Often it is simply a matter of helping a priest to be able to distinguish between those moments when he is talking to God and those when he is talking to the people (both of which are very important in the liturgy!).

A FOCAL POINT OF TRANSCENDENCE

In his book *The Spirit of the Liturgy* Cardinal Ratzinger wondered about some way of restoring a focal point of the transcendent in liturgies where priest faces people across an altar, and the solution he proposed was to have the cross on the altar, between priest and people. In response to this suggestion, Masses are celebrated in some places with the cross and six candles on the altar, between the priest and the people. I have experienced this myself, both in the nave of the aforementioned basilica and elsewhere. My experience from the nave in such buildings is that this arrangement simply puts a barrier, albeit gilded, between priest and people. Facing the cross may help the presiding priest have a greater sense of devotion in his prayers, but I'm less sure of the degree to which it helps the rest of us in this arrangement.

Having a focal point of transcendence in the midst of the liturgical assembly sounds to me like a very good idea, and I think we *already* have one, though perhaps it is often overlooked. To say it better than I can say it myself, here are some quotations from the rites of dedication of church and altar:

By instituting in the form of a sacrificial meal the memorial of the sacrifice he was about to offer the Father on the altar of the cross, Christ made holy the table where the community would come to celebrate their Passover. Therefore the altar is the table for a sacrifice and for a banquet. At this table the priest, representing Christ the Lord, accomplishes what the Lord himself did and what he handed on to his disciples to do in his memory. The Apostle clearly intimates this: 'The blessing cup that we bless is a communion with the blood of Christ and the bread that we break is a communion with the body of Christ. The fact that there is only one loaf means that though there are many of us, we form a single Body because we can have a share in this one loaf. (*Introduction to the Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, 3)

At the altar the memorial of the Lord is celebrated and his body and blood given to the people. Therefore the Church's writers

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have seen in the altar a sign of Christ himself. This is the basis for the saying: 'The altar is Christ.' (*Introduction to the Rite of Dedication of an Altar*, 4)

This altar is an object of wonder: by nature it is stone, but it is made holy when it receives the Body of Christ (*Rite of Dedication of a Church*, no. 17, quoting St John Chrysostom)

In many older churches, the Blessed Sacrament is reserved in a tabernacle centrally located behind the altar, at a greater or lesser distance. For this reason, when people enter the church building they tend to genuflect. I have been living at Glenstal Abbey for seventeen years, where the tabernacle is not thus located. As a novice I found myself, for the first time, bowing several times a day to the altar itself as I passed in front of it. Eventually the body language taught me that something awesome takes place at this location (I may have known that already to some extent, but this was a different way of knowing). The *altar itself* can be experienced as a truly holy place, a place of revelation, a focus of the transcendent One who is 'God-with us'. Perhaps a good response to the intuitions of Cardinal Ratzinger, now Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, is to look again at the design of our altars, and also the degree of reverence which they evoke in us. Do we design and act as if this table were truly '*an object of wonder*'?

Sunday Literature. The Sunday liturgy should be the primary source of catechises for sacramental preparation. It is the right place for hands-on formation. Here we actually do what we talk about. A picture is worth a thousand words. On the other hand, in the classroom, we instruct in a vacuum, in a void, We have greatly underrated the weekly celebration of the Sunday liturgy as the forum for formation in discipleship

– SEÁN SMITH, *Jesus: Answer to Evangelising the Irish Church*, Knock, 2022, p.200

‘Usque ad Sanguinis Effusionem’: The Historical and Theological Foundations of the Inviolability of the Seal of Confession

Errol Xavier Lobo

The confessional seal of the Catholic tradition has always had something of an enigmatic quality, making it ready material for the numerous books and movies that have had their premises entirely based on it. In recent years, however, it has come under increasing scrutiny for more serious reasons; significant among them, the role it might have played in instances of sexual abuse of minors within the Catholic Church and the manifest institutional failure to address these crimes. The question of the extent to which civil legislation might impinge upon the confessional seal, moreover, is now a matter of considerable controversy within several secular societies. These discussions – not always conducted without acrimony and confusion – have led to deeply polarising positions on the confessional seal. For many, it symbolises everything that is wrong about the institutional Catholic Church, attesting to the structures of secrecy and power that led to problems in the first place. For others, that the confessional seal is sacrosanct is a matter of fundamental Church teaching and its defence is “a necessary testimony,” even “*usque ad sanguinis effusionem*.”¹ This paper concerns itself with the historical and theological foundations of the latter: how, and to what extent, is the inviolability of the confessional seal rooted in the very nature of the Sacrament of

1. “To the shedding of [one’s] blood”– as stated in The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, “Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal,” (Vatican City: Vatican, 2019). For an example of a public claim of the inviolability of the confessional seal being “a matter of fundamental Church teaching,” see Timothy Costelloe, “Pastoral Letter to the Catholic Community of the Archdiocese of Perth,” (Perth: Archdiocese of Perth, 2020). These documents lack page and paragraph numbers, and are thus cited as such throughout.

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Reconciliation as understood by the Catholic Church? To that end, it *first* surveys the history of the seal within the Catholic tradition, gleaning from it the theological foundations that underpin the gradual development in the Church's understanding of the nature and extent of the seal. It *then* explores, in some detail, these fundamental theological reasons that support the Church's present understanding of the sacramental seal as utterly indispensable.

THE HISTORY OF THE SEAL

In pursuing the history of the confessional seal, we are undoubtedly plagued by not only its own slow and complicated emergence but also the vicissitudes of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and evolving notions of sin in the Christian tradition.² We look in vain if we seek to find in the Scriptures anything that resembles contemporary practice of the Sacrament; nor is there any direct scriptural evidence that Christ commanded his followers to observe norms of absolute secrecy concerning the sins of others. Yet, the Scriptures do provide the theological foundations that underpin the Church's ministry of reconciliation and significantly, the origins of the practice of confession of sins.³ For present purposes, it suffices to note that this practice of confessing and forgiving sins, in accord with the vision of the New Testament, is remarkably well attested throughout the Church's history and goes back to the very beginnings of the Church's existence.⁴ The crux of the matter, then, is the extent to which some notion of secrecy – however vague – has accompanied this practice through the ages as well as the rationale for that secrecy at various stages in the Church's history. The *raison d'être* of the sacramental seal, after all, is a matter distinct from canonical legislations that enforce it.⁵ Thus, even though the phrase “seal of confession” does not appear until the fourth century in the East and in the eleventh century in the West, and canonical legislation concerning the sacramental seal in the West does not appear until the Fourth Lateran Council (1217 CE), that the Church possessed some consciousness of the *theology*

2. See, *inter alia*, Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred: A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Missouri: Liguori, 2014), 317–69.
3. Cf. Mk 2:1–12; Mt 3:6, 9:1–8, 16:18–19, 18:15–20; Lk 5:20, 7:48, 17:3–4; Jn 20:19–23; Acts 24:16; Eph 4:31–32; Jas 5:16; 1 Jn 1:9. For a brief treatment of the scriptural foundations, see David M. Coffey, *The Sacrament of Reconciliation*, ed. John D. Laurance, *Lex Orandi Series*, (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2001), 32–41.
4. The terms “confessing” and “forgiving” are to be understood in the broad sense, as in Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 320–24.
5. Cf. Anthony Fisher, “Safeguarding the Seal of Confession,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 95, no. 2 (2018): 133–34.

of the seal should not be prematurely ruled out.⁶ Rather, it is to this gradually emerging and slowly refined theological consciousness that we must first turn.

It appears that the practice of confessing and forgiving sins in the immediate centuries after Christ's death existed in the form of a system that comprised of public confession and public penance that preceded the penitent's restoration to the communion of the Church.⁷ It is not entirely clear whether these confessions were to specific representatives, to the relevant assemblies, or to the wider public. There is certainly evidence, as Bertrand Kurtscheid noted in his magisterial study, that at least some early Christians believed public humiliation to be "especially efficacious" for the forgiveness of sins.⁸ Irenaeus is generally taken as a representative of this view, envisioning a public confession of even "secret" sins.⁹ This view, however, was hardly determinative in the long run, and even as a general pattern of public penance for "public" sinners began to emerge, there were also voices in favour of confidentiality for "secret" sins by the fourth century CE. Augustine exhorted that secret sins be healed "in secret," and Gregory of Nyssa opined that secret theft could be reconciled by "secret confession."¹⁰ Although it is not entirely clear when, the office of priest-penitentiary was instituted in the East around this time to facilitate private confession of sins as well as restrict public confession of sins, since – as the historian Hermias Sozomen put it – it was onerous to admit one's sins "as in a theatre with the congregation of the Church as witness."¹¹ Ambrose mentions confessing privately to one person, while Syrian Church Father Aphraates instructs those hearing confessions not to expose those who confessed their sins to them.¹² The motivation for secrecy in these instances appears to be a vague concern for the interests of the penitent. That this is the case is clearer in the case of Basil the Great, who was concerned about protecting the penitent from any harm that might occur from the revelation of their sins to a third party, as in the instance of a woman whose husband might seek to kill her if he learnt of her adultery.¹³

6. Cf. Brendan Daly, "Seal of Confession: A Strict Obligation for Priests," *Australasian Catholic Record* 90, no. 1 (2013): 5.

7. Coffey, *Reconciliation*, 42–43.

8. Bertrand Kurtscheid, *A History of the Seal of Confession*, trans. F. Marks (St Louis: Herder, 1927), 283–84.

9. Kurtscheid, *History of the Seal*, 8.

10. For a list of relevant citations, see Daly, "Seal of Confession," 6.

11. Hermias Sozomen, *Patrologia Graeca*, 67:1459; Sozomen, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7:16. Cf. Coffey, *Reconciliation*, 43.

12. For a list of relevant citations, see Daly, "Seal of Confession," 6.

13. For a list of relevant citations, see Daly, "Seal of Confession," 6.

By the fifth century CE, the harshness of public penances, the social stigma that went with them, the restriction of such ecclesiastical reconciliation to once in a lifetime, and the rigorous demands placed on those who had been reconciled through such a process (especially in the West) had all contributed to a general decline of the practice of public penitence.¹⁴ Christians increasingly shared details of their spiritual lives with “guides” or “spiritual fathers,” even confessing their sins and shortcomings to obtain advice in attaining holiness. A clear attack on the practice of public confession of sins during this time is Pope Leo the Great’s papal decree in 459 CE when, in writing to the bishops of Campania, Samnium, and Picenum, he describes the admission of individual sins in open assemblies as an abuse that must be abrogated.¹⁵ Leo’s rationale in this regard is fascinating, to say the least. He asserts that it is sufficient for sins to be indicated privately to priests, that many would be too afraid to confess their sins in public for fear of being exposed, and that he is concerned to protect people from personal harm and public prosecution that might result from such revelations to third parties. Especially noteworthy is his concern that if people did not believe that their confessions would remain secret, they would not confess their sins at all and would thereby be cut off from “the salutary remedy of penance.”¹⁶ In subsequent centuries, “private” practice of penance was further popularised by Irish missionaries to continental Europe, carrying with it a tacit understanding of confidentiality on the part of “confessors.” The practice of public penitence was thus ultimately, and despite sporadic ecclesiastical disapproval, eclipsed by what had once begun “as an unofficial sacrament” and even “denounced as contrary to tradition.”¹⁷ Significant for purposes here, however, is – as Anthony Fisher notes – that “long before it was a matter of canonists, secret confession was recognised in the faith and pastoral practice of Christians.”¹⁸

The canonical legislations, dogmatic definitions, and the work of theologians (and, in some instances, civil laws) that followed suit attempted to codify and flesh out what was often vague and tacit in pastoral practice. As early as 554 CE, the Second Synod of Dwin threatened priests who revealed the confessions of penitents with deposition and formal excommunication.¹⁹ In the eighth century CE, Nicephorus legislated that “it is absolutely

14. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 333–35.

15. A translation of the relevant passage may be found in Gregory Zubacz, *The Seal of Confession and Canadian Law* (Montreal: Wilson & Lafleur Ltee, 2009), 8.

16. Cf. Zubacz, *Seal of Confession*, 8.

17. Martos, *Doors to the Sacred*, 340.

18. Fisher, “Seal of Confession,” 133.

19. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 7.

forbidden for a mediator to say or in any way manifest those things that belong to confession” and Charlemagne made violation of the secrecy of confession a civil crime.²⁰ The Gratian *Decretum* of 1151 CE was equally clear: the priest is not to “make known the sins of the penitent.”²¹ Violations of the confessional secrecy in this period, moreover, were serious offences meriting serious punishments: those who were found guilty were often deposed of priestly office, formally excommunicated, or at least punished with lifelong exiles and monastic penances. The Fourth Lateran Council of 1215 CE, the first Ecumenical Council to address the issue, followed Gratian in its own decree *Omnis utriusque sexus* and thus not only taught the doctrine of the confessional seal but also established severe punishments for its violations.²² Two critical matters, however, were largely left unattended in such decrees. *First*—in a way typical of legal codes – they offered no explication of the theological or ecclesiological significance of this secrecy. Was the confessional seal, then, of the very logic of the sacrament (even, *de jure divino*) and thus enshrined within ecclesiastical law, or was it merely, so to speak, established by the Church by her own authority? *Second*, they showed little concern for clarifying the extent of the confessional seal. Did it cover only the sins of the penitent, or everything revealed during the sacramental encounter? Was it utterly inviolable, or did it admit of some exceptions?

Unsurprisingly, responses to these questions in the ensuing period manifested the already variegated motivations for confessional secrecy. Pope Innocent III believed that the confessional seal derived from the very logic of the sacrament. The priest had no “human” knowledge since everything that had been learnt during the sacramental encounter was learnt *in foro Dei* as God’s representative.²³ Thomas Aquinas influentially argued that the sacrament of Penance, like other sacraments, signifies what takes place “inwardly.”²⁴ The penitent’s “submission” to the minister is a sign of the penitent’s inward submission to God, and since God does not reveal what has been confessed to God in the sacrament, neither should the minister.²⁵ Aquinas also believed that any information the priest gains through the sacramental encounter, he

20. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 7.

21. “*Deponatur sacerdos qui peccata penitentis publicare praesumit.*” Cf. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 7.

22. On the influence of Gratian on Lateran IV, see Atria A. Larson, “Lateran IV’s Decree on Confession, Gratian’s *De Penitentia*, Confession to One’s *Sacerdos Proprius*: A Re-Evaluation of *Omnis Utriusque* in its Canonistic Context,” *Catholic Historical Review* 104, no. 3 (2018): 415–37, <https://doi.org/10.1353/cat.2018.0041>.

23. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 8.

24. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.1.

25. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.1.

gains *non ut homo, sed ut Deus* [not as man, but as God], even to the extent that he, in good conscience, could say that he “does not know” what he knows only as God’s minister.²⁶ For Aquinas, moreover, confessional secrecy is “essential” to the sacrament and “follows” from the sacrament itself.²⁷ And he – like Leo the Great had once asserted – recognised that it plays a part in attracting penitents to the sacrament. He notes that people are more willing to confess their sins “with greater simplicity” if they are assured that their sins will never be divulged.²⁸ Without this assurance, human frailty impedes them from availing the salutary effects of the sacrament. The seal thus safeguards not only temporal goods (such as the penitent’s safety and reputation) but also the supernatural good of the faithful. Aquinas, in fact, repeatedly warns against the possibility of giving “scandal” in this regard and urges caution when the minister learns something both outside and through the sacrament.²⁹

That the confessional seal belonged to the very logic of the sacrament, in fact, became *the* Catholic view in subsequent centuries, and was repeatedly affirmed or at least assumed by theologians and canonists – even when they disagreed about other matters, such as the nature of confessional knowledge.³⁰ The Church was thus thought to only be safeguarding what was essential to the sacrament with “all her moral and legal might” through ecclesiastical legislations, not establishing something new on her own authority.³¹ The question of the *extent* of the seal, however, remained a more controversial one, thrown further into light by the recent exchange between Ian Waters and Anthony Fisher.³² Does the confessional seal cover only the sins that the penitent confesses (the narrow view supported by Waters), or does it include other matters that might arise during the sacramental encounter (the broader view supported by Fisher)? And is it utterly sacrosanct, so that not even the penitent might release the confessor from the seal, or are their limits to its application? Aquinas evidently took the broader view, arguing that the seal of confession

26. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.1.

27. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.1, 4.

28. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.1.

29. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.2–4.

30. For instance, Duns Scotus disagreed with Aquinas that the priest knows the sins of the penitent “as God” and not “as man.” Scotus distinguished between receiving the confession *in persona Dei*—which the priest did not do – and *in persona propria* – which the priest did do. For him, since the priest acts as a man with God’s authority, rather than as one with God’s identity, the priest did in fact possess confessional knowledge as man.

31. Cf. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, “Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.”

32. Ian Waters, “The Seal of Confession,” *Australasian Catholic Record* 94, no. 3 (2017): 330–43; Fisher, “Seal of Confession,” 131–51.

“indirectly” covers other matters that might relate to the penitent’s sins.³³ So too did Alphonsus Liguori who believed that should a penitent confess someone else’s sins, those sins would be indeed covered by the seal.³⁴ Yet, Aquinas also thought that a confessor could use knowledge obtained through the sacrament to prevent a disaster so long as the confessional matter itself were kept secret, and even that the penitent could release the confessor from the seal in certain circumstances.³⁵ Robert Bellarmine permitted even more exceptions and argued that for certain sins such as heresy, the content of the confession could be revealed to the bishop so long as the penitent’s identity remained hidden.³⁶ Other theologians argued that the seal was not applicable when absolution was denied.³⁷ Duns Scotus, Durandus, and Gabriel Biel argued that the penitent lacks authority to release the confessor because the seal belongs to the Church, not individuals.³⁸ Of course, it was not only theologians who were interested in the extent and inviolability of the seal. King James I thought that the confessional seal should be broken if it prevented “a great crime” and even executed a priest for failing to report the so-called Gunpowder Plot of 1605 CE to authorities.³⁹ French jurist Denis Talon likewise argued that it should be broken to prevent the assassination of a ruler.⁴⁰

Such exceptions to the confessional seal were condemned by a decree from the Holy Office in 1682 CE; the rationale being, in part, that were the Church to acquiesce to any “exception” to the seal, it would open herself to pressure for other exceptions and undermine public confidence in the sacrament.⁴¹ The broader reading of Fourth Lateran Council’s *proditio peccatoris*, the betrayal of the penitent, thus prevailed in subsequent centuries, even as none of the subsequent ecumenical councils mentioned the confessional seal. An *Instruction on the Seal of Confession* from the Holy Office in 1915 CE notably lamented those who “are not ashamed rashly to speak, in private conversation or in public sermons, for the edification of their hearers, as they say, of matters which have been submitted to the power of the keys

33. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.2. For instance, Aquinas considered any information that would disclose the identity of the penitent to fall within the extent of the confessional seal.

34. Alphonsus Liguori, *De Sacramento Poenitentiae*, cap. 3, dub. 1, n. 641.

35. See, Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 10; Fisher, “Seal of Confession,” 134.

36. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 9.

37. Anthony Gray, “Is the Seal of the Confessional Protected by the Constitutional or Common Law?,” *Monash University Law Review* 44, no. 1 (2018): 118.

38. Dexter S. Brewer, “The Right of a Penitent to Release the Confessor from the Seal: Considerations in Canon Law and American Law,” *Jurist* 54, no. 2 (1994): 430–31.

39. Gray, “Seal of the Confessional,” 118.

40. Gray, “Seal of the Confessional,” 118.

41. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 10.

in sacramental confession” even though they were careful enough to avoid “substantial” violations of the seal.⁴² As Brian Lucas comments, the concern was apparently that *any* discussion linked to confessional matter could bring the sacrament into disrepute and undermine public confidence in the integrity of the seal.⁴³ The *Code of Canon Law* (1917), in calling the sacramental seal “inviolable,” continued the long-established tradition of understanding it to be broad-ranging and exceptionless.⁴⁴ So too did the revised *Rite of Penance* promulgated in 1974 CE after the Second Vatican Council that emphasised that any knowledge obtained by the priest through the sacramental encounter was gained only as God’s minister and that, as a result, the seal was to remain “absolutely inviolate.”⁴⁵ The *Code of Canon Law* (1983) distinguished between the seal of confession and confessional secrecy, but again insisted that the former constituted an absolute obligation.⁴⁶

The competence of the penitent to release the confessor from the sacramental seal, however, continued to remain unresolved.⁴⁷ Kurtscheid argues that even though the issue was not addressed by the Lateran Council of 1215 CE and subsequent ecclesiastical laws before the 1917 Code, canonists and theologians largely held that the penitent could release the confessor from the seal.⁴⁸ John Roos, in his doctoral dissertation, takes the same position vis-à-vis the 1917 Code.⁴⁹ In its commentary on Canon 983 of the 1983 Code, however, The Canon Law Society of Great Britain took the contrary position.⁵⁰ In its recent Note, the Apostolic Penitentiary – finally addressing the matter – asserts that the confessional seal “lies beyond the reach of the volition of the penitent who, once the sacrament has been celebrated, does not have the power to relieve the confessor of the obligation to secrecy, because this duty comes directly from God.”⁵¹ It represents the culmination of a long process towards understanding the confessional seal as being of the very essence of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and *de jure*

42. See especially Brian Lucas, “The Seal of the Confessional and a Conflict of Duty,” *Church, Communication and Culture* 6, no. 1 (2021): 109, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23753234.2021.1890164>.

43. Lucas, “Seal of the Confessional,” 109.

44. Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 10–11.

45. Paul VI, *Ordo Paenitentiae*, 10d.

46. See treatments in Daly, “Seal of Confession,” 11–16; Robert T. Moriarty, “Violational of the Confessional Seal and the Associated Penalties,” *Jurist* 58, no. 1 (1998): 156–70.

47. For an overview of the history of the controversy, see Brewer, “Right of a Penitent,” 424–54.

48. Kurtscheid, *History of the Seal*, 291.

49. John Roos, *The Seal of Confession* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1960), 64.

50. See Lucas, “Seal of the Confessional,” 109.

51. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, “Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.”

divino, utterly inviolable, and concerning everything that the penitent has admitted during the sacramental encounter and thus known to the minister by virtue of it.

The Church's present understanding of the nature and extent of the confessional seal is thus the result of a long and complex journey; one that involves a gradual deepening of the theological foundations of the seal and its relationship to the Sacrament of Reconciliation itself. Yet, from this history, we might glean *two* distinct but interrelated aspects that sum up, as it were, the steady development of the Church's understanding towards the inviolable nature of the confessional seal: the *bonum paenitentis* [the good of the penitent] and the *bonum sacramenti* [the good of the sacrament].⁵² In understanding how the confessional seal safeguards these twin goods, we recognise how it functions not just negatively, by preventing confessional knowledge from being divulged outside the confessional, but also positively – and perhaps even more fundamentally – as something indispensable for the celebration of the sacrament and serving the ultimate good of human persons. What follows presents the theological foundations that underpin the Church's present understanding of the nature and extent of the confessional seal by exploring these *two* aspects in the light of the post-conciliar understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation.

THE SEAL AND THE BONUM PAENITENTIS

The history of the seal attests that, at one level, confessional secrecy relates to the *bonum paenitentis*. In fact, a concern to protect the penitent from adverse effects to their physical security and reputation, should knowledge of the sins be divulged, emerges early on. This, we might say, is the “natural law” foundation of the confessional seal, building upon the Church's understanding of “secrecy” and its relationship to the fundamental dignity of human persons. In this regard, Waters rightly notes how Catholic teaching has traditionally distinguished between different kinds of “secrets” even outside the confessional: “natural secrets,” whereby a person has a natural right to keep private one's family matters, health, personal experiences, and in a sense, one's sins; “committed secrets,” whereby one assures another that something discussed or discovered will not be divulged; and “entrusted secrets,” whereby one enters an implicit contract with a professional such as a psychologist or lawyer in exchange of a service rendered.⁵³ Of course, the right to secrecy is not absolute, and there may

52. These “goods” are identified in Moriarty, “Confessional Seal,” 154–55.

53. Waters, “Seal of Confession,” 332.

be legitimate exceptions that demand that such information be divulged for a greater good – an issue to which we will return soon. For the most part, however, human persons are entitled to avail of secrecy in ways that preserve their good reputation as well as their physical, material, and social rights. That persons have a right to such secrets is a matter of justice. It is also a matter of charity. Common good and solidarity among people can be promoted only when social life is built upon a proper sense and recognition of the inherent worth of every person that includes, among other things, a right to keep certain matters private.

The Church, therefore, insists that individual privacy and confidentiality be respected out of a common commitment, at all levels, to the dignity of human persons and the promotion of authentic fraternity. In fact, the recent Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary responds to the matter of civil legislations impinging upon the confessional seal precisely by situating such developments in civil societies within an even wider context.⁵⁴ It criticises “a certain ‘longing’ for information,” a search for “news” and “scandals” that takes on “the disturbing traits of morbidity,” even to the extent of disregarding the distinction between public and private spheres of human life. It even notes a disturbing “negative prejudice” regarding the Church’s defence of the confidentiality inherent to certain forums such as the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The suggestion is evidently that antipathy towards the confidential nature of sacramental knowledge is, in fact, only a symptom of an even wider disregard of the role of confidentiality vis-à-vis individual rights and fraternal charity in general.⁵⁵

The secrecy pertaining to the Sacrament of Reconciliation, then, must firstly be located within this broader sense of *bonum paenitentis*. It exists not only to prevent harm, but to promote good—both individual and common. While, on the one hand, those who approach the minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation do so on the implicit terms of entrusted secrecy (thus making it a matter of justice that the secrecy be maintained), there is, on the other

54. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, “Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.”

55. This concern for confidentiality is taken up even more evocatively in Pope Francis’ *Fratelli Tutti*; a paragraph worth quoting in its entirety: “Oddly enough, while closed and intolerant attitudes towards others are on the rise, distances are otherwise shrinking or disappearing to the point that the right to privacy scarcely exists. Everything has become a kind of spectacle to be examined and inspected, and people’s lives are now under constant surveillance. Digital communication wants to bring everything out into the open; people’s lives are combed over, laid bare and banded about, often anonymously. Respect for others disintegrates, and even as we dismiss, ignore, or keep others distant, we can shamelessly peer into every detail of their lives.” Francis, “*Fratelli Tutti*,” (Vatican Website, October 3, 2020), sec. 42. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20201003_encyclica-fratelli-tutti.html.

hand, a secrecy owed the penitent because of the nature of what is disclosed during the sacramental encounter, something only fully appreciated in the light of the “demands” placed on penitents as laid down by *The Rite of Penance* (RP) of the post-conciliar Church.⁵⁶ What does the Church, through RP, ask of those who approach the Sacrament of Reconciliation? There is no doubt that penitents are expected to confess their sins and are obliged to confess their grave sins. Forgiveness of sins, after all, is the focus of the sacrament. Yet, RP envisions that the penitent will do nothing less than “open [their] heart to the minister of God.”⁵⁷ This is not an exhortation to make judgments about the sins one has committed, confessing only what ‘needs’ to be confessed to avoid ‘eternal damnation,’ but to draw one’s consciousness of all one’s sins into the light of God’s mercy and be completely open with one’s confessor about one’s reality before God. It is a vision reflecting the Church’s post-conciliar understanding of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as both a sacramental encounter in which the sinner receives “pardon and peace” and a part of an ongoing – indeed, lifelong – journey of conversion.⁵⁸

Coffey has perceptively observed the “personally demanding” nature of this vision. As he describes it, “What matters, as far as confession is concerned, is that the person be truly repentant, that they be sincere of heart, and that in their confession they do their human best (which is not necessarily an absolute best) to express whatever they find in their heart needing to be said on this occasion of grace.”⁵⁹ What is disclosed during sacramental confession, therefore, is understandably more than just sins as items put on a list. In “opening their heart” to the minister, penitents bring to the sacramental encounter everything that bears upon their consciences and what is known in their hearts as affecting their relationship with God and other people. The Sacrament of Reconciliation thus constitutes, in a particular and unique way, an entering into the mystery of another human being, one who places their confidence in the minister as a sacramental representative of Jesus Christ, the “friend of sinners” (cf. Mt 11:19). Pastoral experience only confirms that in the course of the Sacrament, all manner of things “tumble out,” even though sacramental confession is not, *per se*, spiritual direction or psychological counselling.⁶⁰ The knowledge

56. This discussion of the “greater demands” of RP is indebted to Coffey, *Reconciliation*, 100–07.

57. *The Rite of Penance*, trans. The International Committee on English in the Liturgy (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1975), sec. 6b.

58. Cf. The English translation of the prayer of Absolution, as found in *The Rite of Penance*, sec. 46.

59. Coffey, *Reconciliation*, 106.

60. Cf. Fisher, “Seal of Confession,” 134.

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obtained by the minister concerning the penitent often includes a whole range of matters besides sins: an individual's innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires; their secrets, temptations, habits, and difficulties; their hopes and longings; matters that every person has a right to keep private. Such knowledge surely comes with an implicit expectation that disclosures made for the sake of spiritual counsel will remain confidential in their entirety. Regardless of whether individual matters might qualify as "sins – and it is not always easy to neatly separate "sins" from "other" matters – they are related to the *bonum paenitentis* that demands that they be treated with the confidentiality owed to human persons, and hence encompassed by the theology of the confessional seal.⁶¹

The *bonum paenitentis*, though, is not utterly sacrosanct, and no doubt there already exist legitimate exceptions that demand that entrusted information be divulged for a greater good.⁶² From a technical point of view, moreover, if the confessional seal simply came down to the *bonum paenitentis*, the penitent could release the confessor from the obligation of the seal.⁶³ It is therefore necessary to consider the second aspect that underpins the Church's theology of the inviolable nature of the confessional seal: the *bonum sacramenti*. As shall be seen, the *bonum sacramenti* takes precedence over the *bonum paenitentis* when the two aspects come into conflict.

THE SEAL AND THE *BONUM SACRAMENTI*

We only begin to appreciate the significance of the *bonum sacramenti*, however, if we recognise that the sacramental seal is more than just a professional secret (as in the cases of doctor-patient, lawyer-client, or counselling relationships). In Catholic teaching, the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a privileged encounter between the penitent and God.⁶⁴ To return to an earlier point, the

61. Lucas provides a helpful hypothetical scenario to illustrate the claim that it is not always easy or desirable to "split sins and non-sins" in the sacramental encounter. See Lucas, "Seal of the Confessional," 108; Brian Lucas, "The Sacrament of Reconciliation and Civil Law After the Royal Commission," *The Canonist* 11, no. 2 (2020): 281.

62. Indeed, in matters such as the sexual abuse of minors, few reasonable people would place the rights of the perpetrator (especially, the right to secrecy) over the rights of the victim.

63. Cf. Moriarty, "Confessional Seal," 155.

64. "It must be emphasized that nothing is more personal and intimate than this sacrament, in which the sinner stands alone before God with his sin, repentance and trust." John Paul II, "*Reconciliatio et Penitentia*," (Vatican Website, December 2, 1984), Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, sec. 31. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_02121984_reconciliatio-et-paenitentia.html.

penitent during the sacramental encounter “opens their heart” to God; the priest is only present as minister of the sacrament. He (the priest) ministers as the sacramental representative of Jesus Christ, the “friend of sinners” (cf. Mt 11:19). He acts with the authority entrusted to the Church and indeed *in persona Christi* as he welcomes the penitent, listens to them, and absolves them of their sins. The ‘I’ of the priest – in the celebration of any sacrament – is thus never his own, but Christ’s.⁶⁵ Any knowledge of what the penitent has revealed during the sacramental encounter is thus also not his own, but Christ’s.

To say that the priest acts sacramentally, of course, is not to say that he ceases to also act humanly or that the penitent does not encounter the human nature of the priest during the sacramental encounter. It does imply, however, that in the Catholic tradition, anything revealed by the penitent is revealed not to Fr. X or Fr. Y but to Christ, whom Fr. X or Fr. Y represents through his sacramental ministry. This is the understanding of every penitent who approaches the Sacrament of Reconciliation because it is the teaching of the Catholic Church. Fr. X and Fr. Y are simply not free to reveal anything learnt from the sacramental encounter because it is not theirs to reveal. It is only in this light that we can appreciate Aquinas’ teaching that what is known from the sacrament is known *non ut homo, sed ut Deus*, even to the extent that the priest, in good conscience, could say that he “does not know” what he knows only as God’s minister.⁶⁶ And it is only in this light that we can see why the seal binds the confessor even “interiorly,” as the Note from the Apostolic Penitentiary puts it.⁶⁷

The Sacrament of Reconciliation thus carries by its very logic – that is to say, the way the Catholic Church understands it theologically – the right of the penitent to know that what is revealed in the sacramental forum will never be disclosed in the human forum. And to emphasise it again, what is revealed is everything that the penitent finds in their heart needing to be said to God as they encounter God sacramentally through the mediation of the priest. Without this assurance, human fragility would simply get in the way and people would be deterred from approaching the Sacrament of Reconciliation. The slightest hint that what has been revealed to God alone could become known would, in fact, encroach upon the interior freedom of penitents in approaching the

65. Cf. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, “Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.”

66. Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl. IIIae, q.11 art.1.

67. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, “Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.”

It asserts that the priest is obliged to even suppress any involuntary recollection of what he has learnt through the sacrament and is absolutely forbidden from ever acting on confessional knowledge, even if the identity of the penitent remains concealed.

Sacrament of Reconciliation since it would be compromised by the fear, doubt, mistrust, and struggle which is natural to fragile human beings in such matters. And while God is, in no way, limited by the Sacraments, the Catholic tradition does recognise the irrevocable way in which God has bound himself to them, thus insisting that the Sacrament of Reconciliation constitutes the only ordinary way in which mortal sins are sacramentally forgiven and those cut off are restored to ecclesial communion.⁶⁸ To deprive penitents of the absolute interior freedom that comes from knowing that what they say will never be revealed in an extra-sacramental forum is thus to deter them from approaching the sacrament and thereby deprive them of the sole ordinary way of having their grave sins forgiven as well as put into risk their eternal salvation. To borrow some words from Pope Francis, the celebration of the sacraments in the Catholic tradition – the Sacrament of Reconciliation in this case – is, and must always be, not a prize for those with super-human courage or tremendous inner strength, but a powerful medicine for the weak.⁶⁹

To permit a single exception to the confessional seal, then, is to undermine the *bonum sacramenti* itself: the very integrity of the sacrament. The *bonum sacramenti*, after all, touches the very heart of the sacramentality of the Church and God's saving designs. The Church is herself the sacramental sign of salvation to the world. As Christ's Body, she continues across time and space every element that was central to Christ's mission through the sacramental economy.⁷⁰ And Reconciliation denotes the very essence of Christ's mission: "In Christ, God was reconciling the world to himself" (2 Cor 5:19). To compromise the confessional seal is thus to strike at the very nature of the Church; it is to prevent her from being all that she is by virtue of being the sacrament of the reconciling Christ in the world. Only in this light can we understand why the Church scrupulously defends the integrity of the confessional seal, seeing it as being of the very essence of the Sacrament of Reconciliation and *de jure divino*, utterly inviolable, and concerning everything that the penitent has admitted during the sacramental encounter and thus known to the minister by virtue of it. Not even the penitent thus has the right to release the confessor from the obligation of the seal and the *bonum sacramenti* takes precedence even over the *bonum paenitentis* if the two aspects ever come into conflict. The confessional seal does indeed exist as a

68. *The Rite of Penance*, sec. 31; John Paul II, "Reconciliatio et Penitentia," sec. 30.

69. Cf. Francis, "Evangelii Gaudium," (Vatican Website, November 24, 2013), Apostolic Exhortation, sec. 47. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html.

70. On this point, see especially Coffey, *Reconciliation*, 34–41.

fundamental aspect of Church teaching, relating ineluctably to the Church's own sacramental nature and economy. Unsurprisingly, then, the Church does expect that confessors will witness to this truth as "a necessary testimony" even unto death – an element already contained within the Church's history.⁷¹

Finally, we might note – however briefly – that the *bonum paenitentis*, to the extent that it belongs to natural law, does not require any distinctively religious insight for it to be appreciated, and as noted previously, does legitimately admit of exceptions. Appreciating the *bonum sacramenti* and its exceptionless nature, however, presumes Christian faith and requires an assent to Catholic doctrine on the various matters that have been previously touched upon. The question of the extent to which civil legislation might impinge upon the confessional seal is fought on this latter battleground. The real issue, then, is not the extent to which non-believers share the Church's understanding of the nature and extent of the confessional seal, or even see the "*libertas Ecclesiae*" as coming from God and not individual States.⁷² In fact, many people do find elements of the *bonum sacramenti* "peculiar, laughable, or even pernicious," and would prefer some restrictions to the *libertas Ecclesiae* within secular societies.⁷³ The real issue is the right of citizens within avowedly secular societies to practice their fundamental religious beliefs in freedom of conscience and without political or legislative interference.⁷⁴ Exploring the historical and theological foundations of the confessional seal in the Catholic tradition has established this fact: the inviolability of the confessional seal is indeed a fundamental matter of belief for those who profess the Catholic faith. Civil legislations that impinge upon the integrity of the confessional seal, then, do constitute "a violation of the right of Catholics" to "practice their deeply held beliefs freely and without government intrusion" and must be recognised as such.⁷⁵

CONCLUSION

This paper has explored the historical and theological foundations of the confessional seal within the Catholic tradition. It has asked how, and to what extent, the inviolability of the confessional seal is rooted in the very nature of the Sacrament of Reconciliation as

71. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, "Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary." On witnesses to the inviolability of the seal in the Church's history, see, *inter alia*, Fisher, "Seal of Confession," 139–40.

72. Cf. The Apostolic Penitentiary of the Holy See, "Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary."

73. Cf. Costelloe, "Pastoral Letter."

74. See especially Fisher, "Seal of Confession," 148–50.

75. Cf. Costelloe, "Pastoral Letter."

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understood by the Catholic Church. To that end, it first surveyed the history of the seal within the Catholic tradition, gleaning from it the theological foundations that underpin the gradual development in the Church's understanding of the nature and extent of the seal. It then explored, in some detail, these fundamental theological reasons that support the Church's present understanding of the sacramental seal as inviolate. It argued that the confessional seal does indeed exist as a fundamental aspect of Church teaching, safeguarding the twin goods of *bonum paenitentis* and *bonum sacramenti*, but also significantly relating to the Church's own sacramental nature and economy. And it is thus that the Church expects of confessors the defence of the confessional seal as "a necessary testimony," even "usque ad sanguinis effusionem."

Joy and Happiness. Joy and happiness are two different things, although they are obviously related. There are things in our lives we feel happy doing or experiencing. For example, watching a good movie makes us feel happy for the time we are watching it. Happiness is very much in the moment, and it can be good. But joy is a different thing. Joy is a deeper sense than happiness. We feel happy watching a film, but feel joy when we see a good friend whom we haven't seen for a while. Joy is different.

– IRISH JESUITS, *Sacred Space 2023*, (Dublin: Messenger Publications), 2022, p.246

C.S. Lewis and the ‘Wee’ County of Louth

Paul Clayton-Lea

Before his death aged 64 on November 22, 1963, the writer C.S. Lewis expressed a concern to his secretary Walter Hooper that sales of his books would most likely decline or even vanish shortly after his passing. Almost 60 years and 200 million copies later Lewis’s fears have proved groundless. In many ways, thanks to his faithful secretary Hooper, Lewis’s works of Christian apologetics and English Literature as well as his less well-known science fiction have never gone out of print while the classical children’s stories about Narnia and Aslan keep him permanently in the public eye. Attention has also inevitably turned towards his personal life even to the extent of a successful stage play *Shadowlands* (1993) by William Nicholson, transferred very successfully to the silver screen by Richard Attenborough, about his marriage late in life to the dying American poet and writer Joy Gresham.

Lewis’s main concern before he died was for the welfare of his alcoholic brother Warren who had lived with him for most of his life and who would likely face an uncertain future following his brother’s demise. Thanks to the perennial popularity of his sibling’s writings however Warren was well taken care of financially until his death ten years after his famous brother.

A COMPLEX RELATIONSHIP

While Lewis had been supported financially by his Belfast solicitor father Albert throughout his young adult life when studying at Oxford, he nonetheless experienced a degree of poverty that had left its mark upon him. The poverty arose from a situation and relationship that he kept hidden from his father for several years. He was living with an older woman, Mrs. Janie Moore who had

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spent the early part of her life in Co. Louth where her father, Rev. William James Askins had been Rector of the parish of Dunleer for over 25 years. Janie's marriage had broken down – she ever afterwards referred to her husband as 'The Beast' and she was left with few resources to bring up their two children, Paddy and Maureen. Paddy and Lewis were thrown together at Oxford in 1917 as they awaited deployment during the First World War and became firm friends. Lewis's mother Flora had died when he was just nine years old, and Mrs. Moore took Lewis under the family wing in a way that made him feel very much at home. The two teenage soldiers promised one another that in the event of either's death the survivor would care for the remaining parent. The lot was to fall on Lewis for 34 years following Paddy's death on the battlefield in 1918. When he made his home permanently with Janie and 12-year-old Maureen, they found it difficult to make ends meet. His only published diary *All My Road Before Me (1922-27)* describes a relatively happy, though sometimes chaotic, home and academic life. This was frequently punctuated by financial problems that led to Lewis deceiving his father about the extent of his relationship with Janie in order to help alleviate the situation. Albert knew Mrs. Moore but didn't realise his son was sharing a home with her. The deception practiced on his father haunted Lewis, this rigorously moral man, for the rest of his life. Lewis' diary reveals that they moved house frequently to save money but the diary gives no indication of any relationship beyond that of protectiveness and emotional support between Janie and Lewis. She had mothered him after his return from the war wounded by shrapnel and nursed him during bouts of ill health later. In ways he seems an obvious substitute for her own lost son. Lewis in turn provided whatever financial resources he could lay his hands on, mostly from his father but sometimes through private tuition. Although she saw her social position through her Co. Louth antecedents as somewhat elevated Janie too assisted by taking on sewing work. Lewis also undertook most of the daily household cleaning tasks including looking after the series of stray cats and dogs that Janie was wont to adopt. In reading the diary however it needs to be remembered that Lewis only maintained it at Janie's behest and read sections of it aloud to her regularly. He also gave it to his brother Warren to read when Warren returned from his regular travels so that he could catch up on his brother's doings in his absence! It was never going to be an intimate account of his innermost feelings. Even the closest of his many good friends admitted that Lewis avoided any real form of emotional sharing of himself. His earliest biographers were content to accept Lewis's regular designation of Janie to his friends and correspondents as 'mother' but later writers have

inevitably speculated with thin evidence on the complexity of the relationship between the 19-year-old Lewis and 43-year-old Janie. In his own biography *Surprised by Joy* (1955) Lewis hinted at an early romance in his life but insisted on drawing a veil over any details.

THE 'WEE' COUNTY CONNECTIONS

Janie's roots in Co. Louth were later to entwine the lives of both Lewis brothers – for very different reasons - to the extent that both of them came to know the 'Wee' county as well, if not better, than their native Belfast and Co. Down. In his memoir the late northern politician David Bleakly (1925-2017) a student of Lewis from Strandtown in Belfast where the writer was born recorded; '*Jack (C.S.Lewis) felt as much at home in Annagassan in Co. Louth as he did in Belfast.*' Even more significantly and certainly from the point of view of readers of Lewis's classic children's series 'The Chronicles of Narnia', the landscape of Ireland and in particular the Cooley mountains and Carlingford Lough merging with south Co. Down were pinpointed by Lewis as the setting in his imagination for the mythical land of Narnia. The place that he most enjoyed viewing 'Narnia' from was the verandah of the Golden Arrow cottage comprised of three disused railway carriages which occupied an isolated coastal field in Salterstown, near Annagassan in Co. Louth. This was the setting he described in letters to friends as '*a place of unearthly beauty,*' filled with the stories of faeries and ghosts from his Irish nurse Lizzie Endicott that he had been captivated with as a small boy. His brother Warren took more enjoyment from the spirits on offer at the Glydeside Inn, the 200-year-old pub in Annagassan on the shores of Dundalk Bay. Today the O'Reilly family who have owned the pub for generations still maintain the 'snug' where local memory recalls the two brothers would sit, smoking and drinking on long summer evenings before beginning a three mile walk at low tide back to their rooms at the Golden Arrow.

The Golden Arrow also belonged to a Louth woman, Vera Henry, who was Janie Moore's goddaughter. Vera, whose niece Eileen Filgate is now in her 92nd year and who vividly remembers staying in Oxford with the brothers and her aunt, acted as cook and housekeeper for the brothers and Mrs. Moore in Oxford when they were finally able to own a large house with its own private woods and lake from 1930 onwards. During summertime when Lewis could finally holiday in the country he claimed as a refuge and called '*that delectable land*' Vera too would return home to Co. Louth from Oxford and, with the help of two maids, work

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hard maintaining the Golden Arrow and its guests. Despite many offers from his legion of fans Lewis rarely travelled anywhere but to Ireland on summer holidays and Co. Louth was always part of the itinerary. Only after his marriage in 1956 to Joy Gresham did he finally fulfil her wish and bring his dying wife to Greece. But he had brought her to Ireland and to Annagassan and to visit his 'Narnia' location twice before that happened.

DROGHEDA AND THE MEDICAL MISSIONARIES OF MARY

Another reason for maintaining the constant link with Co. Louth, which outlasted the deaths of Janie in 1951 and Vera in 1953, was the frequent alcoholic debilitation of Warren. He almost drank himself to death in Annagassan when on his own little holiday at the Golden Arrow in 1947. Thanks to the ministrations of Mother Mary Martin (1892-1975) and her Medical Missionaries of Mary at their training hospital in Drogheda Warren recovered. When Lewis dashed from Oxford to his brother's hospital bedside in Drogheda he wrote to his friends that Warren was being cared for '*by the most charming nuns.*' Mother Mary's charms enticed Lewis sufficiently to write an essay on the Christian response to sickness and death for the Medical Missionaries of Mary Magazine to mark their 10th anniversary. This marked the beginning of a relationship with the Medical Missionaries which was to endure for the rest of their lives.

IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF LEWIS

In recent years the Annagassan Historical Society organized a C.S.Lewis 3 mile walk from the church in Dunany, Co. Louth, where the Lewis brothers worshipped when staying at the Golden Arrow, to the now near empty site on the seashore where the railway carriages stood until the 1970s. As our small group made its way down lanes and through fields there were occasional pauses for children to read passages from '*The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe.*' A tree was planted with the owners permission at the rectory in Dunany where Janie Moore was reared. The afternoon concluded with tea and biscuits at the site of the Golden Arrow looking across Dundalk Bay at the blue mountains which inspired C.S. Lewis in his writing of the Narnian books between 1949 and 1953.

The walk on that autumn afternoon caused me to reflect upon the fact that little mention is made of Lewis and his Co. Louth and Irish influences in any of his biographies. When I came to realise that, during my childhood years, the creator of Narnia had passed

my own home front door each day on his way to visit his brother in hospital, I felt it was time to record whatever memories still remained of those who remembered them at that time.

I was more than fortunate to meet and get to know Eileen Filgate, who now lives in Lisrenny, Tallanstown, Co. Louth, for whom Lewis had written a poem on the occasion of her Confirmation and which she generously gave me permission to publish. Similarly a retired undertaker from Drogheda, Paddy Townley who as a young man had worked for the Medical Missionaries of Mary as a hospital porter and had been charged with looking out for Warren when he attempted to visit some of the local taverns. Paddy could vividly recall his time with 'the Major' as Warren was known. The Medical Missionaries Archives also revealed previously unpublished letters from the brothers to Mother Mary and some paragraphs from the original essay about their work, which Lewis had written for Mother Mary, and which they graciously gave me permission to use. The Marion E. Wade Center in Illinois, USA holds the unpublished diaries of Warren Lewis which run to a million and a half words. They kindly discovered for me, and gave permission to use, the relevant sections relating to the brothers time in Drogheda and the Golden Arrow in the 1940s and '50 as well as photographs from the period. The result has been a new publication *C. S. Lewis and the 'Wee' County* which is now available from Veritas shops or directly from the author.

In November 1994 St. Pope John Paul II requested a visit from Walter Hooper to discuss Lewis. The Pope had admired Lewis' writing and was believed to have ensured it was translated into Polish. At the end of their meeting he said to Hooper. 'C.S. Lewis knew what his apostolate was – and he did it!'

The date of Lewis's death, 22 November, is commemorated in the Church of England, the US Episcopalian Church and other Anglican churches but, surprisingly perhaps, not yet in the Church of Ireland into which he was born. The coming anniversary year might be an appropriate point at which to rectify the omission of Ireland's most effective modern evangelist.

A Sacramental Theology for Today

John J. Burkhard

The Catholic church is not a daily news item. When it does hit the headlines, it is often for the wrong reasons. Surely, the most sustained and intense media scrutiny of the church came following the disclosure of the extent of clergy sex abuse and the bishops' woeful response to the victims and their lack of accountability to the faithful. Recently, many American Catholics were perplexed when some bishops threatened to deny Holy Communion to Catholic politicians who support *Roe v. Wade*, even when they do so only for reasons of national public policy. In comparison, the announcement on January 14, 2022 by then bishop Thomas J. Olmsted of Phoenix, Arizona, that baptisms performed by a priest of the diocese over twenty years were *invalid*, might seem of little consequence. In fact, it strikes some Catholics like caviling to think that using the word 'we' instead of 'I' in the words of baptism crossed a sacred boundary that caused the bishop to call for the rebaptism of scores of individuals. Did their pastor, Fr. Andres Arango, who had administered those baptisms with the slightly altered formula, stray so far from Catholic practice that men and women who for a good part of their lives believed that they were Catholics and practiced their faith loyally were, according to church law, not baptised at all?

The issue, which has received scant notice in the media, is actually far from trivial. It forces to the surface a number of foundational issues that touch on the theology of the sacraments and of the church. It also raises issues of pastoral judgment and leadership. Catholics need to know what kind of thinking goes into such decisions – decisions that not only affect those who have been directed to be baptised a second time, but the rank-and-file Catholics who have to make sense of their pastors' directives. Decision makers in the church, too, need to explain what kind of

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A SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY FOR TODAY

theology justifies such decisions. Meaningful explanations are part and parcel of evangelization today.

It might be helpful for Catholics wondering what is happening in the church, if I shared some thoughts on the sacraments from a theologian's perspective. My aim is to provide some insight into how sacramental theology has changed since the days of my youth and why it is important to rethink every now and then what we believe when we talk about the sacraments and receive them.¹

A MEDIEVAL THEOLOGY THAT HAS SERVED THE CHURCH WELL

The sacramental theology that was taught at Catholic schools, colleges, and seminaries before the reforms of Vatican II was the one I and my classmates learned at the University of Innsbruck, Austria, in the 1960s. The sacraments could be identified by their matter and form and by their minister. The discussion of each of the seven sacraments began by determining its unchangeable material element (e.g., water or unleavened bread or chrism) and which verbal formula was spoken in conjunction with this matter. There was no flexibility when it came to pronouncing the appropriate formula of prayer. As a young priest I was taught that there was no room for variation or expansion upon the sacramental formula. I had to memorise it exactly and speak it precisely.

Hardly anyone called this 'matter and form sacramental theology' into question. It had been operative in the church since the twelfth century at least, and its most influential exponent, St. Thomas Aquinas, had based his thought on the categories provided by the newly rediscovered writings of Aristotle. 'Matter' and 'form' were two of the classical 'causes' Aristotle had identified to explain the physical world. These causes explain the reality before me and how it is to be defined. They explain how this reality differs from other things. The 'matter' and 'form' of the sacraments, too, explain how they are 'causes' – outward signs, instituted by Christ, to give grace. After the great scholastic thinkers, sacraments were broadly understood in this way in some form or other until Vatican II.

'Matter and form sacramental theology' had the advantage of being fairly easy to understand and explain, quite apart from Aristotle's intricate theory of hylomorphism. But it also had certain drawbacks. It tended to oversimplify the sacraments and it decoupled them from other, equally meaningful dimensions of ecclesial reality, such as the liturgical context in which a sacrament

1 I wish to thank my friend and fellow theologian Dr. Richard Shields for his assistance. His suggestions have helped me clarify my ideas and improve how I have expressed them.

is celebrated, the human and interpersonal action among the persons administering and receiving the sacraments, and the tendency over time for words and gestures to change their meaning. It also exemplified a strong proclivity toward legalistic solutions and favored juridical expressions. Not infrequently, a legalistic mindset manifested itself in obsessive behavior regarding the rubrics of the Mass and the sacraments and evoked scrupulosity in some priests.

Thinkers had long acknowledged that words express how something is to be understood. But ‘matter and form sacramental theology’ did not do justice to another important role of sacramental words and gestures, namely, how they *signify* the reality to which they point. The richness of signification was important to Aquinas and to most theologians before him. But standard ‘matter and form sacramental theology’ thrived on a static one-to-one approach to reality that ignored the many layers of meaning of a word or action, and showed little adaptability to changing human and cultural contexts. Its strengths lay in clarity and immediacy, not in context and comprehensiveness.

Is this ‘matter and form sacramental theology’ the *only* way Catholics can understand the sacraments? A recent Pew survey suggests that a great number of Catholics do not give much thought to the meaning of the sacraments and that what they think happens in a sacrament is not in agreement with the traditional catechism teachings on the sacraments. Given this situation, I mean no disrespect for the achievements of high scholasticism to say that ‘matter and form sacramental theology’ has lost its intellectual vigor and pastoral moorings. ‘Matter and form sacramental theology’ is not wrong *tout court*, of course, but it needs to be integrated into a richer sacramental pattern in order to meet believers’ changing needs for intelligibility.

It is no wonder, then, that sacramental theology was ripe for newer and more adequate categories of thought in the years shortly before and after Vatican II. The form of sacramental theology taught today is far from the ‘matter and form’ versions of the past. It has been enriched by the results of biblical scholarship, theological anthropology (grace, personhood, secularity), contemporary epistemology (the richness of language, the role of metaphor and symbols, and broader ways of knowing), the role of history in formulating doctrine and determining ecclesial practices, and openness to the contribution of culture and cultural studies in understanding ourselves and the wider world. Post-conciliar sacramental theology represents a sea change in the hands of such theologians as Louis-Marie Chauvet, Kenan Osborne, and Kevin W. Irwin, or even in the rich synthesis of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (nos. 1210-1690). ‘Matter and form’ will always

have their role to play, but the days of isolating them from the other elements of a sacrament are long past.

If, then, the personal, ecclesial, and pastoral elements of understanding the sacraments situate them in a much broader context today, what contribution might these factors make in addressing the case of Fr. Arango?

THE SACRAMENTS ARE FOR PEOPLE

A constant in sacramental theory has been the unshakeable conviction that the sacraments exist for the salvation of men and women. The sacraments are the privileged, but by no means the only way by which the Trinity shares their life with humankind. *Sacramenta pro hominibus sunt* – sacraments exist for the sake of weak and sinful men and women, according to an age-old theological adage. This conviction grounds the sacraments and their administration.

If there is a ‘sacramental order’ (or ‘economy’ in theological parlance), it is not there to perpetuate itself but to be of service to human salvation by mediating it. A ‘sacramental order’ is the context that offers sinful humankind trust and confidence in the ultimate efficacy of all seven sacraments. A ‘sacramental order’ must have a certain flexibility, so that it does not degenerate into a self-serving ‘system.’ Rules, guidelines, and rubrics are provided as the normal way the sacraments are administered – and they should be observed. But rules must *not* be allowed to obscure the fact that salvation is always shared with other persons. Far from saying that ‘rules are meant to be broken,’ a ‘sacramental order’ in the church strongly reaffirms Jesus’ position that ‘the sabbath was made for humankind, and not humankind for the sabbath’ (Mark 2:27 – New Revised Standard Version). Is there more flexibility in the administration of baptism than the solution of Bishop Olmsted?

In baptism, the recipients are incorporated into a community of salvation and belong to the people of God. This is true of all the sacraments, which confirm the individual in the divine life by binding her more closely with others in the church. Through the sacraments a Christian grows in that shared life. That is why the Second Vatican Council can speak of the church as the ‘universal sacrament of salvation’ (Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, no. 48). The renowned French theologian Henri de Lubac, S.J., reminded the church of this insight as early as 1938, and the German bishops vigorously promoted it at Vatican II.

Take penance, for example. The ecclesial dimension of the sacrament means that the penitent is not only reconciled to God but is also reconciled with his brothers and sisters in the faith. An

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ecclesial dimension is true, as well, for marriage, which is often misconstrued solely as deeply personal and exclusive bonding. This romanticised understanding of marriage easily misses the communal dimension. The union of husband and wife in the sacrament of marriage is both a figure of the church and a true expression of a life that is shared with the community of believers and not independent of them.

Let us return to the question of the *words* of baptism. One need not explicitly say ‘we baptise’ in order to express this social, ecclesial bond brought about by baptism, for this bond is realised in the very act of baptising a person into the body of Christ. To say ‘I baptise’ does not exclude the concomitant action of the community in welcoming the baptised person into the church. But the community of believers that welcomes the newly baptised into the Church cannot be meaningless and without effect. Its welcome, too, belongs to the sacramental action. Fr. Arango appears to have been keenly aware of the communal character of baptism but not entirely clear about how the baptismal formula in the singular expresses it.

The *intention* of the minister also plays an indispensable role in every sacramental action. Most of the sacraments are administered only by a priest, deacon or bishop. In an extreme emergency, however, lay persons are permitted to baptise. The minister celebrates the sacrament according to the mind of the church. At the very least, the minister intends to do what the Church intends in positing a sacrament. In the mind of a non-Catholic administering baptism in an emergency situation, this intention might be confused and vague, but that does not negate the intention. Can the same be said of a Catholic minister who exhibits some confusion when celebrating a sacrament? Do we have reason to doubt that Fr. Arango intended to do what the church intends? How much latitude is permissible here?

THE PASTORAL DIMENSION

A final thought that might help us make sense of the confusing case before us is the pastoring activity of the celebrant and the welcoming community – pastoral care. ‘The care of souls’ (*cura animarum*) demands a sensitivity and a delicacy in meeting the spiritual needs of people. Each penitent is different, each couple is unique, each child preparing to receive the Eucharist is precious. The minister of the sacrament must deal with each individual case by representing Christ the Good Shepherd here and now for this unique person and within this specific community. This task demands great love, deep insight, delicate tact, and total dedication from the minister.

A pastor recognises when a person is being called to deeper life by the Spirit and facilitates that movement, whatever the circumstances might be. A pastor responds to a soul that longs for deeper communion with the Lord and does not stand in the way of that burgeoning love. The focus of attention of the minister of the sacrament must always be the recipient – the man, woman or child needful of divine grace.

The pastoral quality of administering the sacraments is more than mere ‘window dressing.’ Pastoral care is an integral element of every celebration of a sacrament. It is the concrete expression of the minister’s awareness of the Trinity’s love for this individual or group. When the minister has a pastoral heart and mind, it opens his eyes both to the questions, doubts, and hidden anxieties of the life of faith and to a person’s deeper yearnings for divine love. The same holds true for the community celebrating the sacrament and which participates in the pastoral care of the presiding minister.

CONCLUSION

I offer these reflections to help Catholics better understand the sacraments in general, but also to help them deal with situations of sacramental ministry that are sometimes outside the bounds of what is normal and that can provoke confusion. I have tried to raise pertinent questions for thinking through a confusing and painful pastoral situation in an American diocese against the background of a richer general sacramental theology. Is rebaptism in the case we’ve examined the *only* solution? Is it the best pastoral solution? Reflecting on a particular situation in one local church might also be a catalyst for deeper reflection on sacramental and pastoral practice in other local churches. I hope that my observations offer a possible model for approaching other complex pastoral situations in times that are challenging for the entire church. A historical and theological perspective is integral to authentic discernment and can assist Catholics to not only form questions for themselves, but also help them discuss difficult situations with others.

Catholics today are called to be co-responsible for the church along with their pastors and bishops. The synodal path on which Pope Francis invites us to journey together will require honest conversations, mutual listening, and open minds. Good communication requires words and ideas that resonate with the experience of ordinary Catholics today. My sincere hope is that such communication will create the needed space to respond to the often surprising and unanticipated guidance of the Holy Spirit in the life of the church.

Liturgy, Mission and Ministry in Ireland Today: *Random Reflections and Thoughts*

Thomas R. Whelan

PART ONE: LITURGICAL FORMATION

There are significant changes taking place in the Catholic Church in Ireland at present, not least are those which touch, either directly or indirectly, into the very heart of what it is to celebrate liturgy. Liturgy is not marginal to who we are or to our Christian self-understanding. This must now be re-evaluated, and thereby supply us with a synodal-type process of hope motivated by pastoral need and not unduly restrained by financial resources.

These ‘random reflections’ are stimulated by a recent publication.¹ In subsequent parts to this article, the concept of ‘pastoral’ liturgy (Part Two), as well as the relationship between worship and ‘mission’ (Part Three), and ministry (Part Four), will be looked at. ‘Pastoral’ liturgy is somewhat maligned as a concept and, one fears, is generally reduced to pastoral ‘dos’ and ‘don’ts’. This short-circuits a *creative dialogue* between what liturgy presupposes and the actual human *experience* of worship. ‘Mission’ is an ill-defined word generally used as a handy term that is applied to anything and everything. It can also lead to superficial

1 ‘The Amen Corner’ in the October 2021 issue of *Worship* 95, 292-298 [page reference will be given in the main body of the text in square brackets]. The contributor is Nicholas Denysenko writing on ‘Liturgical Theology in Crisis – Twenty-First Century Version’, to mark the centennial anniversary of the birth of Alexander Schmemmann (d. 1983).

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understanding of the foundational and fundamental mandate from Christ.

LITURGICAL FORMATION I

Recent events have brought into focus, once again, the celebration of liturgy itself, how we might best approach this in Ireland, and how we might serve the all-important field of liturgical formation.² Throughout different parts of the English-speaking world in recent years, courses relating to liturgical theology began to be watered down. Worse, these were often reduced to ceremonial accounts with a description coming from systematics which is detached from the worship experience. In his article, Denysenko refers to an invitation he had recently received to a virtual panel on post-pandemic liturgy – offered by a first-rate Catholic university – featuring a panel consisting of ecclesiologists and sociologists. Not a liturgist in sight.

The author laments the ‘serious decline’ that the ongoing liturgy reform movement is currently experiencing in the USA. It had blossomed after the Council and had deep roots in the earliest decades of the twentieth century. It should be noted that such a decline is not felt to the same extent in countries like France, Germany, Spain, and Italy where liturgy is valued as an academic discipline and given due honour by the episcopal leadership in these countries. The American experience, however, seems to be reflected in Ireland and the UK (in imitation of that of the USA?).

GATHERING FOR WORSHIP

When the assembly gathers to celebrate liturgy, it does so in a *ritual act* that is *sacramental*: the assembly is placed, in its full humanity, before the living God in such a way that the actuality of salvation offered by God through the Mystery of Christ’s death and resurrection is laid open before it. It is therefore a ‘primary’ act of the worshipping community – one that imbues, infests, transforms, and enlivens. In the words of Alexander Schmemmann:

- 2 Pope Francis has often spoken about the need for liturgical formation – in continuity with his predecessors – and most recently to the Faculty and students of the Pontifical Institute for Liturgy in Rome (7 May 2022). He spoke about the *study* of the promotion of active participation (‘a fundamental dimension of christian life’); the important *ecclesial* role of liturgy; and an evangelisation that ‘starts with the liturgical life which involves all of the baptised’. He referred to the fact that liturgy is ‘not a question of rites, it is the mystery of Christ’. Addressing the importance of serious study of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, he urged that ‘we must continue this task of forming *the* liturgy in order to be formed by the liturgy’. Pope Francis has since issued an Apostolic Letter, *Desiderio Desideravi* (29 June 2022), on the topic of Liturgical Formation which warrants deep study.

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It is precisely in and through her liturgy – this being [its] specific and unique ‘function’ – that the Church is *informed* of her cosmic and eschatological vocation, *receives* the power to fulfil it and thus truly *becomes* ‘what she is’ – the sacrament, in Christ, of the new creation; the sacrament, in Christ, of the Kingdom.³

The study of this event (= secondary theology) must engage and dialogue with lived human experience. However, *how* this secondary theology works is important. It must place value on the salvific encounter of christians before the living God as they enact sacrament. One cannot get to know a piece of music or a theatrical work by first studying the written text or the musical score: encountering this in live performance is essential. Study of the text, but only after the event, can lead to a discovery of fresh horizons and new interpretations. As with literature or music, interpretation of sacramental rites in a specific local church is not a licence for a ‘free for all’ but an invaluable opportunity to allow the salvific mystery of a loving God to invade the life of a particular assembly and its members – and to respond to this creatively.

Liturgical and sacramental theology (a unified discipline) takes as its starting point the actual liturgical celebration and builds on that. It is in the worship-act of the assembly (where ‘sacrament’ happens) that salvation is experienced as an encounter with God. Secondary theology (typically found in lecture halls and in learned books) discusses and talks about this, but *ex professio*, does not experience it. At best, secondary theology points to where God-in-Christ has been and might be encountered (Kavanagh) whereas the primary theological act is constituted *in* the celebrated liturgical event itself. All forms of liturgical formation – in parishes, dioceses, or at more professional levels – need to reflect seriously on the experience of celebrating sacrament, just as the musician needs to examine the detail of the ‘dots’ to gain a deeper sense of the music she is performing – but the magic is in the performance. The importance of this cannot be overemphasised. A classroom-style of systematic theology of sacrament is incomplete and hollow when divorced from the natural environment of ritual action in which the salvific mystery is actualised and celebrated.

3 Alexander Schmemmann, ‘Liturgy and Theology,’ in Thomas Fisch, ed., *Liturgy and Tradition: Theological Reflections of Alexander Schmemmann* (NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary, 1990) 57 [emphasis in the original]. Similar thinking can be found in the writings of Aidan Kavanagh, Robert Taft, John Baldovin, Kevin Irwin, to mention a few.

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INHABITING THE MYSTERY

The importance of liturgy as a lived and celebrated reality cannot be overestimated. The gathered worshipping church encounters, *in a living way*, the presence of God in its midst. And this presence is not passive or 'reified', as is often implied in catechetical and homiletic sources. The encounter of worship (shared in assembly and with God in Christ and the Spirit) embodies the life and mission of the church, without, however, ever substituting for or replacing these.

Gathering for liturgy helps us rehearse attitudes and to learn what proper and 'just' Gospel living might be about. In the citation above, Schmemmann states a truth about liturgy being a rehearsal of a whole lifestyle:

- because we are reconciled, we learn how to embrace forgiveness and to reconcile;
- because we are invited to the table to partake in the Banquet of the Lord, we learn to welcome others to our tables and to share with them;
- because we experience welcome and radical inclusion without pre-condition, we in turn learn to welcome the stranger in our midst without question;
- because we seek mercy, we learn not to hold grudges;
- because we look for transformation through sacrament, we learn to see the transformative action of God around us;
- and because we engage in word with the Word, we learn the importance of encounter with others and identifying echoes of Revelation in words exchanged in truth, beauty, and love.

Notice the number of *verbs* here: reconcile, forgive, share, welcome, seek mercy, engage They all demand of us commitment. Liturgy is *not* primarily about saying prayers or an intellectual exercise or a disembodied spiritual exercise. Being with God overflows into doing. Contemplative action. One could say that in liturgy, to use an Americanism, we 'do' God. While liturgy contains much catechesis, its task is not primarily to pass on information or to inculcate beliefs or promote church doctrines. Worship is bound up with glorification and praise of God and is thus self-implicating. Unconditionally. We become implicated in a certain narrative, supplied by liturgy, which can only be translated into the act of doing. Anything less than this turns our worship into an act of hypocrisy.

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So, liturgy has less to do with words and an intellectualising of faith or even an engagement in ‘profound thought’: it may do these things, but always as a by-product of the worshipful act. Sacramental encounter must be an exercise of carnality before it is an exercise of the cerebral. And it happens week after week.

This life-rehearsal demands that we evaluate everything from the perspective of the Reign as preached by Jesus, and the inherent vision of justice and inclusion in liturgy. The creation of this vision involves a re-setting of the relationships between God and all of creation (the destruction of which we willingly engineer). Justice is indivisible. Liturgy supplies the weekly and daily attempt to learn that the Cross is central to our discipleship, but that this is the same Cross which embodies hope and promise. We learn to rehearse the Kingdom in the contexts within which we live. In this sense it has little to do with personal emotions and feelings *in and of themselves*, but much to do with the human person standing naked before the Mystery. Emotions and feelings must be valued deeply and brought into conversation with the enfleshed Christ so that all recognise that every aspect of our human person forms part of our response to God, that we intuitively learn to right the wrongs we so willingly, if innocently, visit on others and on this tiny part of the cosmos. However, everything cannot be reduced to the subjective.

LITURGICAL FORMATION II

It makes sense that a theological introduction to liturgy and the necessary accompanying formation (which is ongoing) must take the empirical as a starting point – the experience of worship in its multiple dimensions in assembly. The emphasis is on the ‘here and now’, the local, where God’s salvific embrace is experienced as grace. This is the approach that framed how the *National Centre for Liturgy (NCL)* intuitively worked. The more academic and theological consideration of the church’s life at worship is vastly important and was supplied in abundance at the NCL. Participants experienced sacrament as a celebrated reality, in the first place – and prayer was a feature at the Centre at the beginning of each day as they assembled to pray Daily Prayer and Eucharist. In this way, they were immersed in the gentle ebb-and-flow of the liturgical year through their own absorption into the prayer of the church, and thus into a participation in the Paschal Mystery of Christ: as course participants they prayed each day *in Christ*, with the voice of Christ, and *as church*. They got to learn how to live Daily Prayer (Liturgy of the Hours) and came to love it for the exposure it gives to the psalms and to the pattern of praise and intercession that permeate it in and through its capacity to uncover every human emotion and

their potential for transformation in God. This experience of Daily Prayer was the context which created the environment in which systematic reflection on the sacramental life of the church could begin and deepen. Music and song flowed as a living and joyful prayer from worship to classroom and back.

All those lecturing and working in the discipline readily helped shape this experience – not because we were asked to by the leadership in the NCL, but because this is the way in which lecturers intuitively work in liturgical and sacramental formation. When participants saw – and understood – that this was the norm, they felt almost seduced into attuning their ‘faith-sensors’. They became imbued with a method for liturgical formation which framed their ‘learnings’. We hope that this might continue in any new configuration of the NLC.

Much current difficulty around the provision of formation hinges around finance and that enterprise is market-driven, a situation aggravated by the pandemic. This is not unique to Ireland. Third level institutions fuse liturgical and sacramental theology with other offerings, sometimes merging programmes to rationalise resources. Less resources means reduced expenditure. Churches in English-speaking countries in this part of the world have rarely given the priority to the discipline that it requires [see Denysenko, 293ff.]. Liturgy does not form part of the academic agenda in most third-level places, despite the call by the Liturgy Constitution (= SC) 16 that it should ‘rank among the principal courses’. It is no longer deemed to be of importance. The Constitution speaks of an ‘Institute of Pastoral Liturgy’ to guide the Bishops’ Conference in its task of promoting good liturgical practice and to help their Liturgy Commission in the Bishop’s work (SC 44). The early history of the NCL, particularly in Portarlinton and Carlow, consciously served this purpose. Sadly only a few dioceses are now prepared to invest resources in various parochial formation programmes at this time, and the results of this are evident in how parishes deal with various issues relating to worship.

Some parameters and caveats regarding formation:

- (1) We have generally approached liturgical formation in parishes as a didactic activity. However, didactic catechesis is deeply unhelpful and ineffectual. Liturgy, well celebrated, is itself formative⁴ and offers the basis of a mystagogic catechesis.
- (2) This points to the need to take as a starting point the lived experience of worshippers – as a faith-reality, as an

4 ‘The best catechesis on the Eucharist is the Eucharist itself, celebrated well’: Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Sacramentum Caritatis* 2007, 64.

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interpretative tool in helping identify requirements, and as a human engagement that is often hampered by a detached ‘performance’ on the part of liturgical ministers.

- (3) The strengths and weaknesses of the human dimension of sacrament supplies a context that is both real and precious. It is in the ‘human’ that the intersection of salvation with lived reality is most evident. The couple who asks the assembly of the church for its prayerful blessing as they publicly and solemnly exchange their marriage consent do so knowing not just the potential vulnerabilities but also the intense joy of a loving relationship. They know of the frailties of being human but trust the strength and accompaniment of the Spirit operating in their relationship and in the assembly, and of their sacramental insertion into the Paschal Mystery. They know these, never as a magic bond or guarantee, but as an inner power that will guide them for as long as they remain open to the Spirit.
- (4) How we negotiate the human experience of sacrament must be part of liturgical catechesis. It is only in the corporeal encounter in our reality with the efficacious workings of Christ in Word and rite (see SC 48) that sacrament can exist. It does not exist in the ritual books or in the theology of a classroom divorced from lived experience but only when the liturgical rubber hits the road of reality.
- (5) A large gulf exists between what is experienced in worship in the context of daily living (the empirical) and what the catechism teaches us (the cerebral). If celebrated properly and fully, then we find that liturgy exposes us to the experience of being church, the experience of reconciliation and God’s mercy, and the experience of wining and dining at the Banquet of the Lord – through the agency of our fundamental human experience.
- (6) We learn more ‘about’ God in Christ than we might in any book by standing naked in God’s presence in assembly as we confess and grapple with the fact that as sinners we are unconditionally loved, however unworthy we might feel of this Love. It is only because we know our proficiency in sin (not least in social and structural sin) that we can learn – through experience and in faith – the gratuity and abundance of grace.
- (7) This moves us to learn how to intercede for those who do not experience human warmth or inclusion. An invitation to the supper of the Lamb means doing more than simply reaching out actively to those who do not get to eat and drink what is required for basic human survival. Authentic sharing in the Eucharist requires of us to ensure that the appropriate human

structures are in place to guarantee an abundance for those most in need. The sustainability of our current dining habits impacts on how we celebrate Eucharist. The authenticity of our acceptance of the invitation to the Banquet is related directly to our capacity to feed the hungry and create the conditions to alleviate hunger in the world. Not to do this is not just sinful: it is blasphemous.

- (8) The most important caveat in the task of formation is to realise that increasingly people find church and its expressions to be irrelevant. Those who seek God often do so in a more fluid fashion by picking what they consider to be helpful and ignoring everything else. Diminishing church attendance should help us reflect on the seriously deficient styles of liturgy we employ.

Liturgical formation has little to do with ceremonial and more to do with a mystagogical immersion into sacrament and the event of liturgy. What we are dealing with here are the beginnings of liturgical spirituality. The easier and lazier option is normally to go through the ceremonial unfolding of worship and ‘explain’ things. More will be gained by an assembly through the acquisition of a *capacity to ‘do ritual’* – something that has little to do with simply ‘doing the ceremony accurately’.

We need to take seriously the nature of all worship: it is, on the *one* hand, deeply immersed in the world around us with the cultural, philosophical, ideological, and political aspirations of our age, while, on the *other*, simultaneously and profoundly involving a penetration of the saving act of Christ in our engagement with this world. Liturgy can never be reduced to a ‘holy’ or a pious activity of believers. We cannot live, act, or behave except as people who are functioning members of society and world. Crucial to how we live as Christians is how we negotiate with the Mystery of God in Christ. Openness to the action of the Spirit guides. Because liturgy actualises this mystery – that is, makes it a reality in the assembly – it becomes the privileged, but not sole, place where negotiation takes place. This creates a faith and a human dialogue between God’s graced and loving outreach to us and ‘our’ worlds of hope and love, suffering, anxieties, joy, and healing. *This* is where ‘salvation’ occurs and is experienced.

Just as there is a faith-formation dimension to the study of theology at every academic level, this same dimension must permeate the work of pastoral liturgical formation.

Homilies for November [C]

Phil Mortell

All Saints

1 November

Apoc 7:2-4, 9-14. Ps 23. 1 Jn 3:1-3. Mt 5: 1-12.

Today's first Reading must be one of the most encouraging Readings of the entire year. Why do I say that? I say it because, in his vision of heaven, John sees an enormous gathering of saints. He tells us that there are too many to count, "impossible to count," all glorifying God for all eternity. The saints of heaven include, we are told in today's first Reading, "people from every nation, race, tribe and language" – all "worshipping God with these words: "Amen. Praise and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honour and power and strength be to our God forever and ever. Amen." "People from every nation, race, tribe and language:" ours included! In the Reading John asks: "Do you know who these people are?"

I think I can answer that question: Yes. I know some of these saints. I'm thinking of the people who cared for their elderly neighbours, did their shopping with/for them, made dinners for them when they were sick, called to them regularly for a 'chat and a cuppa,' or, phoned them often just to help them spend an otherwise lonely evening. I'm thinking of the parents who cared for children or other family members with addictions, chronic illnesses or life-long disabilities. I'm thinking of the children who cared for their parents with Alzheimer's, or Motor-Neuron Disease or the everyday infirmities of old age. I'm thinking of the carers, both salaried and voluntary, who continue to work 'day in, day out' in our nursing homes and family homes. I'm thinking of those parents who put their children first, who struggle to give them the best possible start in life, sometimes at enormous cost to themselves. They all give their lives, day in day out, for others in ways that are unselfish and loving.

Why do I call them saints? This is why. In today's second Reading, St John asks us to consider the "love that the Father has

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lavished on us in calling us his children.” Later, in that same letter, John says that “God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them.” The people I call saints, and I’ve already mentioned a number of them, are those who took those sayings to heart literally. They accepted God’s love alive in their hearts, they were transformed by that love, and they lived that love in their everyday lives. That’s why I call them ‘living saints.’ I can say that of a large number of people I have known over the last 50 or more years. A few days ago I attended the funeral of a wife who had devoted the last thirty years of her life to caring for her husband who had been confined to a wheelchair after an accident. I believe that people like her are numbered among the saints we honour today. “Divine love” showed in their planned and unplanned acts of kindness, patience, compassion, in their non-judgemental attitude towards others, and in their unselfish service of others – following the example of Christ himself.

If we follow their example, as together we attempt to follow Christ’s example of love for others, then, someday, please God, we will also be numbered among the saints.

Thirty-Second Sunday of Ordinary Time *6 November*
 2 Mac 7:1-2, 9-14. Ps 16. 2 Th 2:16-3:5. Lk 20: 27-38.

Today’s first Reading gives us an account of the persecution and martyrdom of the Maccabean Widow’s seven sons. But, there is a great note of hope at the end, because the Reading ends with the following words of one of the sons: we “rely on God’s promise that we shall be raised up again by him.” That statement is a very clear proclamation of their faith in the Resurrection.

On the other hand, today’s Gospel tells us about the Sadducees who were a group of Jews who didn’t believe in the Resurrection. They came to Jesus to query him on the matter, hoping that he’d agree with them or that they could convince him that there was no resurrection. This disagreement between the Sadducees and Jesus provokes a response from Jesus and puts the resurrection centre-stage.

Today’s Gospel, written by St Luke, gives us Jesus’ own word, his own promise that 1) there is a resurrection from the dead, and 2) the faithful followers of Jesus will rise again. In fact, Jesus calls his followers/us “the children of the resurrection,” and he continues to say that “being children of the resurrection they/we are sons and daughters of God.” If you want a reliable source for your belief in the resurrection, then you cannot get a more reliable source than Jesus himself.

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In Luke's Gospel, we are given very clear and detailed account of Jesus' appearances to the Apostles (when Thomas was absent) and to them later (when Thomas was present). Seeing Jesus, touching Jesus' hands, touching his side changed Thomas from being a doubter to being a believer in the Resurrection of Christ. The Apostles also talked with Jesus, had meals with him, and eventually saw him ascend to the Father forty days after his Resurrection.

The resurrection of Jesus was the first resurrection – but it was not going to be the last. In Luke's Gospel, for example, we are told of the conversation between Jesus and the Good Thief as they hung on their crosses and of Jesus' promise to the Good Thief that "this day you will be with me in Paradise" (Lk 23:43).

During our November Novena for our Faithful Departed we remembered many of our own relatives who have died and who, we believe, are now in heaven.

Earlier this month we read St John's statement that "God is love, and whoever lives in love lives in God, and God lives in them" (1 John 4:8, 16). The saints are those who took those sayings to heart literally. They accepted God's love alive in their hearts, they were transformed by that love, and they lived that love in their everyday lives.

Therefore, God has now said to them: "Come, you blessed of my Father, take possession of the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world".

We have Christ's word that his faithful followers will be raised again from the dead. It is Christ's word as recorded in the Gospels. What surer hope can we have?

Thirty-Third Sunday of Ordinary Time *13 November* Mal 3:19-20. Ps 95. 2 Th 3:7-12. Lk 21: 5-19.

Last Sunday's first Reading gave us an account, in all its gory detail, of the persecution and martyrdom of the seven sons of the Maccabean widow, which happened around 200-180 B.C. In the centuries that preceded that martyrdom, many of the Old Testament prophets were persecuted and some of them were killed, because they stood up for their beliefs, or, they highlighted the injustices committed by the authorities of their times. And, in today's Gospel there is mention again of persecution. And, almost every country around the world, including our own, has experienced persecution on grounds of religion, and even martyrdom at some stage over the centuries.

In more recent times Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador

was shot in 1980 as he celebrated Mass because he too spoke out about the injustices being perpetrated by the civil authorities of his country. He was declared to be a ‘saint’ by Pope Francis just five years ago.

Pope Francis said of Oscar Romero that it was *his life that gave meaning to his death*. That it was his life of devotion to those treated unjustly by the authorities, his life of unselfish service to the poor and disadvantaged that gave meaning to his death. It was particularly his work of opposition to the oppression, persecution, and murder of innocent, ordinary people by the authorities that caused them to turn against him, to persecute him, and, finally, to murder him.

In so many ways Oscar Romero’s life was so like Christ’s own life. Christ was singled out because, as the gospels tell us, he went about ‘doing good’ – preaching, teaching, and healing. And, that ‘doing good’ included highlighting the injustices of his time – whether committed by the corrupt civil and/or religious authorities.

It was Christ’s life of loving service for his people, his gospel of respect, equality and love that caused the authorities of his time to turn against him, to plot his death and to crucify him. In short, it was his life that gave meaning to his death. It was the way he lived, day in day out, that gave meaning to his life and to his death.

We, too, will be judged by our lives, by how we have lived, by what we have done during our lives.

In St Matthew’s Gospel (Mt 25:31-46) we find the writer thinking in terms of Christ’s Second Coming or the Final Day of Judgement. Christ, the King, praises those who, during their lives, had given food to the hungry, drink to the thirsty, clothes to the naked, etc... When they ask: But, Lord, when did we see you hungry, thirsty, naked, etc...? Christ’s reply is simple, and clear-cut: “as often as you did it to one of the least of my followers, you did it to me.” Then he says to them: “Come, you blessed of/by my Father. Take possession of, the kingdom prepared for you since the foundation of the world.”

So, the Gospel message to us is clear: ‘When we give to others we are giving to Christ and our giving to him will not go unrewarded.’

The Feast of Christ the King

20 November

2 Sm 5:1-3. Ps 121. Col 1:12-20. Lk 23: 35-43.

Today’s Gospel Reading records the last hours of Jesus’ crucifixion. Pilate had written a notice over Christ’s cross – ‘The King of the Jews.’ It was written in Greek, Latin and Hebrew so that all would understand it.

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That title, ‘King of the Jews,’ might remind you of the earlier Good Friday Trial of Christ before Pilate. At that Trial, the chief priests and their followers were accusing Christ of political treason, of opposing the payment of tax to Caesar and of claiming to be a king in opposition to the Roman Emperor, Caesar.

Pilate was the Roman-appointed puppet governor of Jerusalem and Judea, a Roman-appointed local small time king, dependent on the support of the Roman Emperor. But, Pilate knew that the real local power in Jerusalem was in the hands of the religious priests and scribes (i.e. the Council of the Sanhedrin), and if he made an enemy of this Council then a complaint to Caesar would mark the end of Pilate’s power – and maybe even the end of his life!

At the beginning of the Trial Pilate asked Christ “Are you the king of the Jews?” Christ answered: “You have said I am.” In other words, Christ is saying: Yes! I am a king. But, I am not a king in your understanding of the word ‘king.’ This was because, in Pilate’s view, a king was someone who imposed himself on people forcefully, and, who maintained himself in power through force. Christ is saying that he is not that sort of king or leader who rules through force, persecution, murder and crucifixion. No! I am, however, a king who rules through respect, kindness, truth, and love. In contrast to Pilate, Christ is saying that he was a king, a leader who leads through love. Throughout his public life as a preacher, teacher, healer, Christ had maintained that the most important value in life was love, love of God and love of one’s neighbour.

Today’s second Reading says that “the Father has made it possible for us to join the saints.” How? By living out those two commandments – by loving God and our neighbour – just as Christ loved and lived them. We are Christ’s followers, following the example of his love for others. In our everyday lives we are representatives of Christ – St Paul called us ambassadors of Christ

To be called an ambassador or representative of Christ is an amazing honour for us as followers of Christ. But, it is also an amazing responsibility. Because it is asking us to continue the work of Christ, the work of loving reconciliation between God and humanity, and to be so Christ-like in living that love that others might see Christ in the way we think, live and act.

First Sunday in Advent

27 November

Is 2:1-5. Ps 121. Rm 13:11-14. Mt 24: 37-44.

Advent begins today. The word ‘advent’ means ‘coming’ or ‘arrival.’ It is the time during which we prepare for celebrating

Christ's birth at Christmas. The second Reading and the Gospel both highlight the need for the followers of Christ to be ready or prepared for Christ's Second Coming.

There's a Christmas reflection called "Mary's Christmas Dream." I'd like to read a short version of it to you because I believe it carries that same powerful message for all of us.

"I had a dream, Joseph. I don't understand it, not really, but I think it was about a birthday celebration for our Son. I think that was what it was all about. The people had been preparing for it for about six weeks. They had decorated the house and bought new clothes. They'd gone shopping many times and bought elaborate gifts. It was peculiar, because the presents weren't for our Son

They were all excited about their gifts. They gave the gifts to each other, not to our Son. I don't think they even knew Him. They never mentioned His name. Doesn't it seem odd for people to go to all that trouble to celebrate someone's birthday and not recognise him? I had the strangest feeling that if our Son had gone to this celebration He would have been intruding. How sad for Jesus, not to be wanted at his own birthday celebration. I'm glad it was only a dream. How terrible, Joseph, if it had been real."

The message is very clear: everyone had really prepared for the celebration of Christmas – buying gifts, wrapping them carefully, decorating the house and the Christmas tree, as part of their preparation for Christmas. But, they had forgotten that they were meant to be celebrating Christ's Birthday, Christ's coming on earth, but the people in the story had left Christ out of their celebrations at Christmas.

No one is asking us to stop celebrating Christmas. No one is asking us to stop decorating our homes, or our Christmas trees, or to stop giving presents to others.

But, Christ is asking us to recognise the *real* reason why we are celebrating Christmas. Because Christ has come on earth, Christ has come into our lives. Christ has given us an example of how we are meant to live, in unselfish love for others. And, he is asking us to recognise that Christ-like love is the real reason for living, the Christ-like way of life, the Christian way of life.

It has often been said that love brings out the best in us and in others. It follows then that through unselfish love we will reach our true potential as humans and as Christians.

St John said that "God is love and anyone who lives in love lives in God and God lives in them." That kind of Christ-like love, divine love, is never-ending, is eternal, is in fact, eternal life.

So, how do *we* put Christ back at the very centre of the celebrations? And, more importantly, how do *we* put Christ back at the very centre of our lives? Christ-like love is all we need.

New Books

Sacred Oils. Paul Turner. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2021. Pp. 141.

Paul Turner is a pastor and a liturgist. Both roles converge and complement each other in his book *Sacred Oils*. The work begins by reminding the reader of the important but often over-looked fact that “Christ” means “anointed one.” The Greek word “Christos” translates the Hebrew word “Messiah.” “Christ” is not Jesus’ second or family name, as some mistakenly presume. “Christ” is the “anointed one” and Christians are the “anointed ones,” anointed with oil and the Spirit.

Anointing with oil is a very ancient and important symbol in the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is interesting to note that the Jews anointed only three categories of people: priests, prophets, and kings. In contrast, Christians anoint everyone in baptism and confirmation as sharing in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly life of Christ. This is the foundation of the ministry of all the baptized in the Church. We are anointed ones, sharing in the messianic mission of Christ.

The introduction discusses the chrism Mass where the oils are blessed (consecrated in the case of chrism). The timing and structure are considered as are the various options allowed for in the liturgical rite. Then, three chapters deal in turn with each oil: the oil of the sick, the oil of catechumens, the oil of chrism. The conclusion makes suggestions about the appropriate care of the oils.

Did you know that the oil of the sick may be blessed during the eucharistic prayer? This ancient custom has now generally been replaced by the blessing of all three oils after the Liturgy of the Word. “The tradition of praying over the oil of the sick within the eucharistic prayer shows the relationship between the substance for the sacrament and the eucharistic bread and wine, as well as the place of the sick within the heart of the church” (23). Turner also reminds the reader that a Christian from another church may request the sacrament of the sick if the person is properly disposed and is unable to have recourse to a minister of his or her own church while manifesting Catholic faith in the sacrament. Various pastoral situations are then discussed: the minister and the recipient, the timing and place, anointing and viaticum.

Did you know that the conference of bishops can decide whether or not to include the anointing with the oil of catechumen in the celebration of baptism? The recently approved new translation from the Conference of Bishops in the United States (2020) notes that the anointing with the oil of

catechumens may be omitted “only when the minister of Baptism judges the omission to be pastorally necessary or desirable.”

Did you know that while any priest may bless the oil of the sick and the oil of catechumen in a case of necessity, only the bishop can consecrate the oil of chrism? While priests renew their promises during the chrism Mass, the focus of the liturgical texts is on the preparation of chrism for baptisms. “Throughout, the people are reminded that they have been anointed with this chrism and they are called through their baptism to bear witness to the redemption” (69). Turner offers a concise commentary on the two prayers for the consecration of chrism, the first a reworking of a traditional prayer, the second newly composed after Vatican II. There follows a treatment of the use of this sacred oil in the baptism of infants and adults, in confirmation, in the ordination of priests and bishops, and in the dedication of an altar and a church.

In discussing how the holy oils be consigned to the priest and to the parishes, Turner notes that “The chrism Mass is more than a friendly reunion. It is more than the blessing of oils. It sketches the relationship between the bishop and his priests. He provides the materials that they will need to carry on their ministry, which they conduct in his name. The bishop has led them and the community through the prayers over the oils and the celebration of the Eucharist. Now he entrusts the oils to the priests” (132).

This book is a compelling compendium of liturgical, sacramental, canonical, and pastoral insights and interesting trivia on the place of oil in the prayer of the church. “To the uncatechized they may seem like ordinary jars,” Turner concludes, “but to the people of God they hold sacred oils” (141).

Boston College

LIAM BERGIN

Festal Icons: History and Meaning. Aidan Hart. Leominster: Gracewing, 2022. Pp. x+445. Price £45 hbk. ISBN: 978 085244 949 3.

This is a beautiful book. If you are in any way interested in the Church’s iconographical tradition you should buy a copy!

Aidan Hart (b. 1957) entered the Orthodox Church in 1983 and since then has worked as a professional iconographer. He has carried out many commissions for liturgical art and has been involved in many projects in collaboration with other experts in church decoration. Some of our readers may have seen carved statue of Our Lady of Lincoln in Lincoln Cathedral that was commissioned to replace the original statue that was lost during the Reformation.

This book is based on the 12 Great Feasts of the Byzantine liturgical year and the icons that are proper to them. The icons for Good Friday and the Resurrection on Easter Sunday are added to these for a total of 14. The book starts with an introductory chapter that situates the theology of

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the icon in East and West. This situates those who are not familiar with this important aspect of the Christian tradition. Then there is a chapter for each of the feasts. These are lavishly illustrated in colour. While many of the icons at the start of each chapter are by the author, the chapters contain a rich selection of the traditional portrayals of these iconographic subjects from both East and West (although you will not find any modern, or indeed any Renaissance or Baroque illustrations).

One of the most novel aspects of this book is that while it of a very high artistic and print quality, it is not a book on art history or a catalogue for a museum exhibition. It is a work of theology and faith. Hart quotes from the Fathers of the Church and the early Councils, as well as the Biblical readings and hymns assigned to the (Byzantine) lectionary for each feast day.

In his 37 pages on Pascha (or Easter) he comments that “just on a a physical level it is clear that the current ecological crisis is the fruit of human sin and greed, and conversely, that beautiful works of art, landscape and design, architecture and wise farming are signs of mankind’s harmonious relationship with matter. Pascha is a time for all creation to rejoice for its delivery, from the burden of corruption has begun, ‘Today the whole creation is glad and doth rejoice for Christ is risen and Hades hath been despoiled’ (Canticle Nine, Paschal Mattins)” (p. 315).

Although the book lacks a general index, it does contain a helpful glossary that will help the beginner to understand that often obscure technical terms. There is also a helpful bibliography and an index of Church Fathers and Apocrypha.

The oft-quoted instruction attributed to the eighth century St. John Damascene says, “if a pagan asks you to show him your faith, take him into a church, show him the icons and explain the series of religious paintings to him.” In this vein reading this book and meditating on the illustrations might not be a bad way to introduce the Christian faith to a catechumen today. They might learn more about Christianity than by following some of today’s catechetical manuals!

St. Patrick’s College, Maynooth

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