

GAZING AND BEING GAZED UPON:

THE DEPTH DYNAMIC OF SACRAMENTAL LIVING

Dwight W. Vogel, OSL

Claremont United Methodist Church celebrated its first Easter Vigil this year. On Good Friday evening, a life-sized tomb had been built beside the pulpit, its rock-hewn door blocking the entrance. At the Vigil, the new fire was kindled outside the chancel windows. When the flame came in to light the paschal candle, we could see that the stone door now stood open. The baptismal font stood in the front of the main aisle, but the discerning eye could see that there was no Lord's Table in the chancel.

Then, during the presentation of the gifts, the door of the tomb was lifted and carried up to become the Table for our Easter Eucharist. Our feast of joy was carried out around that tomb-table. It was powerful visual drama, but for those of us for whom it was a sacramental event, more was at stake. The depth dynamic of our life together is sacramental living, and the depth dynamic of sacramental living is not only gazing, but being gazed upon.

At the center of sacramental life is the apostolic hope---the Paschal Mystery of Jesus Christ, the one whom Edward Schillebeeckx reminds us is “the Sacrament of the encounter with God.”¹ A sacrament is always a gift-event,² and when that gift is God's gift, it is always characterized by superabundance. It cannot be returned in kind. Yet to receive a gift is to establish a relationship. To receive the gift of God's self in Jesus Christ is to participate in it. In receiving Christ, we enter into a shared event of being together and loving together.³ As the writer of I John puts it; “We know that God lives in us by the Spirit given to us.”⁴

So it is with the Eucharist we share. It is God's gift, given to us in abundance. We cannot pay back such a gift, but when we receive it, we share the event with the Triune God and with each other. Our living

¹ Cf. his book by the same name (Sheed and Ward, 1963)

² David Power, among others, uses this term.

³ See R. Kevin Seasoltz, “*God's Gift Giving: In Christ and Through the Spirit* (Continuum, 2007)

⁴ I John 3:24b, *The Inclusive Bible* (Sheed and Ward, 2007).

together and loving together are signs that we are sacraments of God's presence with us in Christ.

When traveling in Ukraine we marveled at the magnificent icons in the orthodox churches there, and those of you who have visited in our home have seen the icons we treasure. However, it is easy for our Western minds to misunderstand the icon. We tend to think of icons as representational images, a visual sign that stands for something or someone else.⁵

Yet the Greek of Colossians 1;15 identifies Christ as the icon of God---not a reminder or a representation, but an event suffused with the divine, saturated with the holy. It is not enough to look at an icon; we must sense that we are being gazed upon.

When I gaze into my beloved's eyes, it is not only that I am looking at Linda, but that she is looking at me. And when, in her absence, I gaze at her picture, it is not so much that I am looking at her picture as that I know her love is looking back at me, and thus she becomes present to me in the "we-ness" of that moment.

Sacraments are iconic; they are the eventing of the paschal mystery. And sacramental presence is real presence, not make-believe presence, but that transformational relationality that characterizes our sacramental living.

That transformational relationality, as Wesley teaches us, involves both personal and social holiness. To "magnify the sacraments" is to "accept the call of service."⁶

In sacramental living, we are gazed upon by the Incarnate One, and incorporated into the paschal mystery. As Joyce Ann Zimmerman insists, the paschal mystery is both Christ's mystery and our mystery."⁷ Indeed, Br. Tom Beveridge reminds us in *Sacramental Life* that "when we speak of living the sacramental life, [persons in the Eastern Orthodox tradition would] . . . speak of "living *into* or *under* the Mystery."⁸

⁵ See the treatment of the iconic in David N. Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God's Giving* (Herder and Herder, 1999), and

⁶ See "The Rule of Life and Service" of the Order of Saint Luke.

⁷ "Paschal Mystery—Whose Mystery? A Post-Critical Methodological Reinterpretation" in Dwight W. Vogel, ed., *Primary Sources of Liturgical Theology: A Reader* (Liturgical Press, 2000).

⁸ "Pluto's Grace with a Side of Fries" in *Sacramental Life* Vol. XX, No. 2 (Spring, 2008), 8

As in the Eucharist, so in our sacramental living, this mystery must include lament: standing with God in “crying over Jerusalem,” lamenting both the condition of our world, and the sin of the church. David Gambrell speaks of our need to set “a table in the wilderness.”⁹ It is not accident that those seeking greater justice and inclusivity in the Church are nourished by Eucharist and the Baptismal Covenant as they seek to bring God’s healing grace to the whole Church. So John’s disciples learned that “the wretched of the earth learn that God is on their side” If that’s what you were expecting, Matthew says, “count yourself blessed.”¹⁰

As in the Eucharist, so in our sacramental living, this mystery is grounded in hope: standing with God in incarnating and anticipating the coming kingdom. We stand with God in the solidarity of loving relationship with the cosmos, with all people (especially the excluded and oppressed), with the church, and with our brothers and sisters in the Order.

A year ago, while teaching liturgy in India I wrote:

I shared two sacraments today:

One, Father David’s birthday mass at a Jesuit house in Bangalore,
sharing a birthday with Archana.

Archana herself was the other sacrament—

25 birthdays, but developmentally still three,
with a radiant smile but only a few words
patiently taught her by Vernoica, her mother.

Obvious delight and joy,

Or in the twinkling of an eye, a flood of tears,
but oh, the love poured out to her and from her,
as a host of relatives and friends filled the house to overflowing
for her birthday feast—

each one taking time to talk to her,
stroke her hair,
touch her face,
and receive her joy as she crawled from room to room,
furniture pushed back,
“to give her freedom,” her mother said.

⁹ “A Table in the Wilderness: Eucharist and Lament” in *Doxolog*, Vol. 24, 2007.

¹⁰ Matthew 11:5-6. Eugene Peterson, *The Message* (NAV Press, 2002).

Is this what God does?

Giving us room to move,
Delighting in our delight
And crying with us in our tears?
Gazing on us, with us, through us
as sacraments of divine love?

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