

“The Work of the People as Public Work: The Social Significance of the Liturgy”  
2008 Institute of Liturgical Studies, Valparaiso University  
April 2, 2008  
William T. Cavanaugh, University of St. Thomas, St. Paul, MN

I was once asked to address the topic of the “social meaning of the liturgy.” The first thing I told my audience was “If I tell you what the social meaning of the liturgy is, you have to promise me you won’t stop going to church.”

What I mean is that there is a problem with trying to distill the liturgy down to a “meaning.” It is a problem that sometimes bedevils efforts to connect the liturgy to ethics or social justice. We sense that there is a yawning gap between what we do in church on Sunday and the various worldly social causes that we are involved in the rest of the week. We sense rightly that that gap ought not to be. So we go looking to “read” the liturgy for its meaning, to see it as a “model” for social action, and to translate that meaning into language better suited to social justice concerns. So, for example, we note that the ritual of presenting our monetary offerings to the altar is an implicit recognition that all wealth belongs to God. If human economic activity and wealth is thus sanctified, we should be concerned about being good stewards of the earth’s wealth. The liturgy then becomes a weekly – or daily – reminder of our responsibility to pursue just economic arrangements, though the policy details need to be worked out elsewhere, outside of the church. But how many reminders do intelligent people need? Once we’ve grasped the meaning of the liturgy, and it has been drummed into us by repetition, do we really need to keep at it? Wouldn’t our Sunday mornings be better spent giving of our money and time to the service of the poor,

rather than sitting in a pew being reminded yet again to pursue justice for the poor? (This is the kind of argument one hears from clever teenagers who have learned that the “church is boring” gambit doesn’t work on their parents.)

The problem is not the connection between liturgy and social justice; as I hope to show, the connection is deep and intrinsic. The problem is with Gnosticizing the liturgy, making it about meaning that individuals digest in church and then go out into the wider world to translate into social action. If the liturgy is about meaning, then that meaning can always be learned somewhere else. And if the liturgy is about learning meaning, then it tends to be individualized. Christians learn about social justice through the liturgy in church, and then go out into the world as individuals to make their mark on the world.

This kind of cognitive approach to liturgy is not the only way people tend to talk about liturgy and ethics. Those who write on liturgy and ethics also talk about the liturgy as shaping the participants’ affections, character, dispositions, motivations, and so on, for the purpose of changing the way the individual acts in the world.<sup>1</sup> Like the cognitive approach, this emphasis on the formation of affections and dispositions highlights an important aspect of the liturgy that should not be neglected. The problem with both of these approaches, however, is that they tend to speak of individuals internalizing the liturgy, then acting on it in the world. The church body as a communal body is only a place of formation, a school to be left behind once one “graduates” to attending to social justice in the “real world.” I don’t think this instrumentalization of the church is very sound

ecclesiologicaly. I also think that it fundamentally misunderstands what the “real world” is.

What I hope to do in this talk, using various biblical and patristic writings, is to show that the liturgy does not simply teach us about social justice or form our affections, but creates a new type of social reality. In the first section, I will examine how the Eucharistic liturgy makes the Body of Christ. In the second section, I will show how the Body of Christ is not a private, sacred space but a fully public social body. In the third section, I will discuss what kind of public body the liturgy makes by discussing the practice of sacrifice. Finally, I will conclude with some observations about what this vision implies for church practice today.

### **I. The Eucharistic liturgy makes the Body of Christ**

The key to our topic is not what the liturgy means, but what it does, more specifically what it makes. What it makes, in Henri de Lubac’s famous phrase, is the church. Putting it this way helps make clear that the Eucharistic liturgy is not a passive object to be read or otherwise internalized by people, but is an action that arranges people into a certain order. It affects bodies externally, as it were, not only internally. It is an enacted drama. The liturgy does not simply energize and inform individuals to go out from the assembly and find social bodies to join. The liturgy makes a body in which social life – including what we call social justice – is lived. As Louis-Marie Chauvet puts it, “The liturgy is not a matter of ‘ideas’ but of ‘bodies’”<sup>2</sup> I would add, it is about a social body, the Body of Christ.

Many of those today who emphasize the link between liturgy and social justice emphasize the effect of the liturgy on the individual person. I often read statements such as “our common worship is a great teacher”<sup>3</sup> and the liturgy is a “school for compassion.”<sup>4</sup> Whether such approaches emphasize the cognitive or affective effects on worshippers, they are susceptible to the same problems. First, if the liturgy is a school, people graduate from school eventually. Why keep going to church once we have been formed? Second, such approaches bypass the ongoing importance of the church as a body that enacts justice in the world. The liturgy “charges our batteries.” The sanctified or enlightened individual is then sent out to act as a leaven in society. The church itself is not an actor in the social realm, but forms individuals to join other social bodies.

For the early church, by contrast, the focus was not on what happens to individuals but what happens to the church in the Eucharist. As de Lubac documents, for the early church, the church itself was the *corpus verum*, the true body of Christ, while the consecrated elements were the *corpus mysticum*, the mystical body. The visible body -- the church -- and the invisible action -- the sacrament -- linked the historical body of Christ to the present. By the twelfth century, the terms had been inverted, so that the church was the mystical body and the elements were the “real” body. The presence of Christ in the church then became focused on the elements. The Eucharist was not so much an action as an object. The sense of Christ’s reality in the visible, social life of the church suffered, as the church became the “mystical” body, and “mystical” came to take on connotations of “interiorized” or “less real.”<sup>5</sup>

For the early church, by contrast, what was crucial about the liturgical action of the Eucharist was the formation of a new social body, the body of Christ. The liturgy was not a teacher about another reality, but made reality present, that is, what is really real, creation as God sees it, redeemed in Christ. And redemption was a matter not of the right ideas or right affections but of being gathered together. In the *Didache* we find the Eucharistic prayer “As this broken bread, once dispersed over the hills, was brought together and became one loaf, so may thy church be brought together from the ends of the earth into thy kingdom.”<sup>6</sup> Here the early church is simply echoing the theme of salvation as *gathering*, prominent in Israel's theology, especially since the Babylonian Exile.<sup>7</sup> Sin is scattering, a breaking of bonds among humans and between humans and God; salvation is a gathering of disparate individuals into a covenanted unity. For the church, however, the gathering now has a specific locus in the Body of Christ.

Paul brings this theme to a special prominence and focuses it on the Eucharist. In the Eucharist “we who are many are one body, for we all partake of the one bread” (I Cor. 10:17). And the body that we are is the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12). The individual believer does not simply absorb meaning from the Eucharist, but is in fact absorbed into Christ. Participation in the Eucharist is a real participation of the human person in the reality of Christ. Furthermore, one cannot speak of autonomous individuals once the Holy Spirit has made us one. Each person does retain her or his proper dignity and difference in the body. In Paul's image in I Corinthians 12, the hand and the eye remain different, and the

body cannot be all eye without ceasing to be the body (12:17). Diversity is crucial. But precisely because the eye cannot say to the hand “I have no need of you,” (12:21) the individual can have no life detached from the unity of the body. Individualism is death; unity is salvation.

Paul believes this so strongly that he warns the Corinthians that the Eucharist may be killing them because of the divisions and factions in the community (I Cor. 11:18-19). Specifically, the rich are refusing to share with the poor in the community’s feasts. Each one goes ahead with his or her “own supper,” (11:21) while others go hungry. For this failure to “discern the body” (11:29) they are “answerable for the body and blood of the Lord,” and some have paid with illness and death (11:30). Most scholars agree that Paul makes no distinction here between the sacramental body and the ecclesial body of the Lord.<sup>8</sup> Failure to “discern the body” is not put in the context of doubting the real presence of Christ in the bread and the wine, but contradicting the very nature of Christ’s body by rending its unity. To eat one’s “own supper,” to turn the Eucharist into a private affair, is to refuse life and persist in death.

Paul’s insight into the identification of the sacramental body and the church body was taken up and expanded upon by the early church fathers. The Eucharist was not simply a didactic representation of another reality but a participation in the reality of Christ. The language of type and antitype already appears in the New Testament. As used by Paul and the pastoral epistles, the type is a heavenly model to be imitated. Hebrews (9:24) introduces the word “antitype” to describe earthly worship as a copy of the heavenly model. The

church Fathers explained this using Platonic categories, such that the antitype is a real ontological participation in the heavenly type. The language of participation indicates that the two share the same being, but are also different. The Eucharist is not merely a ritual model, but is an identification with the type.<sup>9</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, for example, says

It is therefore with complete assurance that we share as in the body and blood of Christ. For it is in the type of bread that the body is given to you and in the type of wine the blood, so that, having participated in the body and blood of Christ, you become a single body and a single blood with Christ. As a result, we become 'Christophers or Christbearers,' since his body and his blood spread throughout our members. In this way we become, as Blessed Peter says, 'sharers in the divine nature.'"<sup>10</sup>

Here the realism of human participation in Christ comes across strongly. It would be easy to focus on the sanctification of the individual in this passage, the sending forth of individual Christbearers into the world. To do so, however, would miss Cyril's emphasis on the singleness of the body and blood of Christ. The body of Christ only is what it is insofar as it is unified. Participation in Christ's being is never, therefore, the pouring of Christ's power into individual vessels, like the pouring of Christ's blood into those awful individual communion shot glasses that some churches use. The pouring out of the Spirit of Christ on all flesh is not the filling of individuals, a power for me to use, but the eschatological gathering of all together. The movement of participation is toward Christ; the small self does not pull Christ into the self, but is rather pulled into the larger reality of Christ.

No passage emphasizes the identification of the sacramental body and ecclesial body of Christ more strongly than the following from one of Augustine's sermons:

If you want to understand the body of Christ, listen to the Apostle telling the faithful, "Now you are the body of Christ and individually members of it" (I Cor. 12:27). So if it's you that are the body of Christ and its members, it's the mystery meaning you that has been placed on the Lord's table; what you receive is the mystery that means you. It is to what you are that you reply Amen and by so replying you express your assent.<sup>11</sup>

Another Augustinian sermon puts it this way:

You are on the table and you are in the chalice, you along with us are this. We are this together. We are drinking this together because we are living this together... Since what is realized is one reality, you too must be one by loving one another, by keeping one faith, one hope, one indivisible love...<sup>12</sup>

The bond among persons and between the church and Christ is not merely a moral or psychological bond, but an ontological one, a bond in their very being, a bond of love which is the act of the Holy Spirit. As John Zizioulas points out, for the patristic writers, people do not exist separately first, and are then drawn into communion with others. Rather, we receive our being *in* communion and as communion with each other in Christ. To be separated from this communion is to lack being.<sup>13</sup> For this reason, Augustine notes with approval that in certain Punic dialects, the word for the Eucharist is simply "life."<sup>14</sup>

## **II. The Body of Christ is a "public" body**

I could multiply examples from the biblical and patristic materials, but I hope that what we have seen so far is enough to establish that the Eucharistic liturgy is much more than meaning or formation of dispositions for the individual



Christian. The liturgy does not simply represent social meaning, but makes a social body, a body that challenges dichotomies such as secular/sacred and public/private. We sometimes think of what we do in the liturgy as something sacred, as opposed to the secular world, and therefore as something private which must be translated into neutral language before it can become public. Thus we may talk about the sacrifice of Christ in the liturgy, but when we move out into the secular world to do social justice, we must translate our cultic actions into neutral language, such as the language of human rights.

The problem is that, despite the generation of ideas and meanings that can make their way into the public realm, the Body of Christ itself remains quarantined in the private. If our allegiance to the Body of Christ is ultimately private, then we will inevitably be formed in more determinative ways by our public allegiances, especially the nation-state and the market. In fact, the public world we inhabit is not secular. When we pledge allegiance to the flag or shop till we drop, we are engaged in deeply formative ritual actions that threaten to eclipse the formative effect of the liturgy if the liturgy is not seen as forming a fully public body. We do not leave church to meet others on neutral public ground. Rather, we act as church in a public context where other public liturgies such as those of the nation-state and the market already stand in tension with our allegiance to Christ.

Alexander Schmemmann argues that the quarantining of the liturgy is a profound distortion. The division of the world into secular and sacred is a result of sin, not simply the way things are meant to be. The Eucharist, says

Schmemmann “is not a ‘religious’ or a ‘cultic’ act, but the very *way of life*.”<sup>15</sup> The Eucharist is the *natural* way of creation, not merely a supernatural act that hovers above some profane remainder. All of creation is “material for the one all-embracing Eucharist”<sup>16</sup> at which humanity presides as priest. The Eucharist is the enactment of Christ’s work of breaking down the barriers between the sacred and the profane. What the church does in the Eucharist is to enact the new humanity, to realize the Body of Christ, a social body based on reconciliation and not violence and division. The church is not meant to be a separate cultic institution, a reservation of the sacred in a secular world, but is meant to make visible what a transformed creation looks like. There is no aspect of creation that is not transformed by the Spirit of Christ. The church in the Eucharist is the passage of the old creation into the new creation; what is transformed is not just the church itself but all of creation.

This overcoming of the barriers between the sacred and the profane helps explain the early Christians’ choice of the term “leitourgia,” from which we get our term liturgy. The Greek original comes from two words meaning “people” and “work.” The word was not originally associated with a cult, but referred instead to public projects done for the sake of the community. Eventually the word became associated with all kinds of service, including that done for friends and neighbors. In the New Testament the word refers to the worship of the church at Antioch (Acts 13:2), but also to the civic function of public servants (Rom. 13:6), Christ’s sacrificial offering (Heb. 8:2), and Christians’ offering of themselves (Rom. 15:16).<sup>17</sup> That the Christians used the word *leitourgia* for their Eucharist

indicates that they did not see it as a private affair, but as a public work, done on behalf of the whole city. This sense of the liturgy received its highest expression in the “stational” liturgies prevalent from the fourth to the seventh centuries, in which, on certain Sundays and feast days, entire cities would be transformed into liturgical spaces by a series of services in churches and public places, linked by processions.<sup>18</sup>

The liturgy should not have to be translated into other terms in order to be relevant to social justice. The liturgy is itself an action that creates a new kind of social body, a public space that participates in Christ’s redemption of all creation. The materials of social justice – work, money, time, politics, soil, and so on – are not separate from the liturgy, for the whole of creation is the material of the liturgy. What the Eucharistic liturgy makes is not ritual meaning for the edification of individuals, but it makes the world what it is meant to be -- and already is -- in God’s eyes.

### **III. The Body of Christ is a sacrificial body**

Now that we have seen that the Eucharistic liturgy makes a social body, and that that body is not confined to the private, sacred, sphere, we need to look more closely at what kind of a social body the Body of Christ is. Here I will try to show that the liturgy makes a sacrificial body. The category of sacrifice speaks volumes about what the mission of the church in the world is about. The kind of body that the liturgy makes is an other-centered body, a body focused on mission, the sending of the church out of itself into the world for the sake of the

world. The emphasis on sacrifice makes clear that the church is not an end in itself, but is a self-emptying for the sake of others. I will focus on two aspects of Eucharistic sacrifice: non-violence and service.

### Non-violence

The term “sacrifice” has fallen into disrepute because of its association with appeasing a bloodthirsty God. In order to avert the wrath of God upon sinful humanity, the Father required the blood of his only Son. In the Eucharist we continue to sacrifice the Son to the Father in the hopes that we may avoid the Father’s anger. This is often the charge leveled against Anselm’s exposition of the meaning of atonement. Because of these connotations, we often prefer the term “celebration” to “sacrifice” for the Lord’s supper. A true understanding of the term “sacrifice,” however, will show that it is based in love, not wrath. For Christ does not suffer the violence of the Father; Christ absorbs the violence of humanity, thus showing how God identifies with the victims of this world, and not with those who do violence. The crucifixion of Jesus shows the injustice of the violence of this world. The resurrection shows that God has sided with the victims. The Lord’s supper is a participation in the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ on behalf of the victims of this world. For this reason Raniero Cantalamessa says “the modern debate on violence and the sacred thus helps us to accept a new dimension of the Eucharist,” thanks to which “God’s absolute ‘no’ to violence, pronounced on the cross, is kept alive through the centuries. The Eucharist is the sacrament of non-violence!”<sup>19</sup>

If it is the case that the Eucharistic liturgy makes the Body of Christ, then the church does not simply commemorate God's "no" to violence, but *embodies* God's answer to violence in the world. We do not simply offer sacrifice to God, but, as St. Augustine says, God "wanted us to be ourselves his sacrifice."<sup>20</sup> We ourselves prefer to absorb the violence of the world rather than to perpetrate violence. For this reason, there is a close link in many patristic writings between martyrdom and the Eucharistic sacrifice. Both martyrdom and the Eucharist were seen as a participation in the passion and sacrifice of Jesus Christ. So St. Ignatius of Antioch, en route to his death at the hands of the Romans, refers to his impending martyrdom in Eucharistic terms: "[P]ray leave me to be a meal for the beasts, for it is they who can provide my way to God. I am His wheat, ground fine by the lions' teeth to be made purest bread for Christ."<sup>21</sup> In the account of the martyrdom of Polycarp, the soon-to-be-martyred bishop offers a prayer in the form of a paleoanaphora, or early Eucharistic prayer, before being consigned to the flames. The text then describes him appearing "like a loaf baking in the oven."<sup>22</sup> In both texts the martyrs express their desire to be made a "sacrifice" to God.<sup>23</sup> These texts emphasize the sacramental body of Christ; St. Cyprian, himself martyred by the Romans in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century, emphasizes the blood: Christians "drink each day the cup of the blood of Christ... that they themselves may thus be enabled to shed their blood for Christ's sake."<sup>24</sup>

The connection between martyrdom and the Lord's supper is not just the celebration of individual heroes, but the creation of a social body that continues God's "no" to violence in the world. Christ himself is the overcoming of division

and violence in the world, and this overcoming is accomplished in his body.

What Ephesians says about Jews and Gentiles applies to the whole of humanity.

For he is our peace; in his flesh he has made both groups into one and has broken down the dividing wall, that is, the hostility between us. He has abolished the law with its commandments and ordinances, that he might create in himself one new humanity in place of the two, thus making peace, and might reconcile both groups to God in one body through the cross, thus putting to death that hostility through it (Eph. 2:14-16).

If violence is what tears the human community apart, if violence is the scattering of sin, then it is the very unity of the Body of Christ that overcomes violence by gathering people into one reconciled Body. Thus, as St. Augustine says, reconciliation is our sacrifice: “This is the sacrifice of Christians: we, being many, are one body in Christ. And this also is the sacrifice which the church continually celebrates in the sacrament of the altar, known to the faithful, in which she teaches that she herself is offered in the offering she makes to God.”<sup>25</sup>

### Service

The other reason that the term sacrifice has fallen into disrepute is its association with bribery. Martin Luther, for example, famously objected to the trafficking in merit associated with the offering of masses, the attempts to bribe God into doing favors for the souls in purgatory. As Augustine talks about sacrifice, however, sacrifice simply means being united to Christ’s offering in Christ’s body. Augustine writes

true sacrifices are works of mercy to ourselves or others, done with a reference to God, and since works of mercy have no other object than the relief of distress or the conferring of happiness, and since there is no happiness apart from that good of which it is said, “It is good for me to be very near to God,” it follows that the whole redeemed city, that is to say,

the congregation or community of the saints, is offered to God as our sacrifice through the great High Priest, who offered Himself to God in his passion for us, that we might be members of this glorious head, according to the form of a servant.<sup>26</sup>

Since to be a sacrifice is to be united to others in Christ, sacrifice involves service to others. We have already seen that the term *leitourgia* has service as its root meaning. Cesare Giraudo notes the close relationship as well of the term *diakonia* or service to the Eucharist, arguing that for the early church at least, horizontal service to others was the true criterion of vertical service to God.<sup>27</sup>

The sacrifice of the Eucharist was intimately bound up with service to others. As Schmemmann notes,

In the consciousness, in the experience and in the practice of the early Church, the eucharistic sacrifice was offered not only on behalf of all and for all, but *by all*, and therefore the real offering by each of his own gift, his own sacrifice, was a basic condition of it. Each person who came into the gathering of the Church brought with him everything that, 'as he has made up his mind' (2 Cor. 9:7), he could spare for the needs of the Church, and this meant for the sustenance of the clergy, widows and orphans, for helping the poor, for all the 'good works' in which the Church realizes herself as the love of Christ, as concern of all for all and service of all to all.<sup>28</sup>

This practice is preserved in my parish by the children bringing gifts of food for the food bank to the altar at the offertory.

It is fairly standard to think of the good Christian, sanctified by the Eucharist, being of service to others. What radicalizes the Christian vision of social justice, however, is the way that the Eucharist confuses the boundaries between those who serve and those who are served. The Eucharist does not simply motivate us to do good things for poor people; it questions the very distinction between us and them.

We have already seen how the Eucharist messes with our sense of identity, overcoming the fiction of individual autonomy and incorporating us into Christ. If we look more closely at the strange economy of the Body of Christ, we see that we are not merely assimilated to the strength of Christ but also to his wounds. If we look to the vision of the last judgment in Matthew 25:31-46, for example, we see that Christ identifies himself not with those blessed who serve, but with the hungry, the thirsty, the strangers, the naked, the sick, and the prisoners. What is most radical about Matthew 25 is not that we will be rewarded for doing good to the downtrodden, but that the downtrodden are in fact Christ. The further implication is that, as we too are assimilated to Christ, the difference between “us” and “them,” the difference between those who serve and those who are served, is radically effaced. We find this same idea in Paul’s vision of the Body of Christ in I Corinthians 12. There is weakness in the Body of Christ (I Cor. 12:22), but the weakest members are treated with more honor (12:24). Their sufferings are taken on by the whole body, such that every member of the body suffers and rejoices together (12:26).

In this vision, the idea of social justice gets cast in an entirely new light. The standard definition of justice that comes to us from Aristotle through Aquinas is expressed in the phrase *reddere suum cuique*: to render to each person his or her own. Justice as pursued by the law of the state has this as its very ideal – to sort out what is mine from what is yours. In the Body of Christ, however, what is mine and what is yours is radically relativized by the participation of all in the same body. Social justice then is not about distribution among individuals in



competition for scarce goods. Sorting out who deserves what is an impediment to seeing the world as God sees it, as it really is. In the Body of Christ, all belongs to God, and none claims absolute ownership of God's abundance. Social justice is not simply a matter of benevolence, but of sharing the fate of those who suffer.

What the Lord's supper does is to de-center the person by turning the act of consumption inside out. We live in a consumer culture where the individual is trained to view life as a series of choices to be made between competing goods. The religious life is by no means immune to this dynamic. Many of the most vibrant forms of American Christianity today encourage the choice of Jesus and of a church on the basis of how well they meet one's spiritual needs, how inspiring and meaningful they are. In the Lord's supper, however, the person does not consume Christ, but is consumed by him. Augustine hears the voice of God say "I am the food of the fully grown; grow and you will feed on me. And you will not change me into you like the food your flesh eats, but you will be changed into me."<sup>29</sup> In turn, the Body of Christ realized in the Eucharistic assembly becomes food for others. The central social act of the Eucharist is to create a body that is consumed, that is, broken and given away to nourish a hungry world. This is the true sense of *mission* that comes to its summit in the Eucharist: to be made Eucharist is to be sent out from oneself, to be de-centered, and to be sent into the world to be food for the world. In the Eucharist, the act of consumption is turned inside out into an act of *kenosis*, or self-emptying. Participation in Christ's Body is not only an ascent to the Father, it is at the same

time a descent with Christ into the broken human condition, a self-emptying into the “form of a slave” (Phil. 2:7).

As Louis-Marie Chauvet points out, the essence of bread is only realized in being consumed. It is bread-as-food, bread-as-meal, bread-broken-for-sharing that reveals the true being of bread. This is especially the case in the Eucharist. As in Jesus’ appearance in Emmaus, the presence of Christ is revealed in the breaking of the bread. Christ’s presence in the Eucharist is not a thing to be grasped, but as Chauvet says, “Christ’s presence comes forward through the mode of being open.”<sup>30</sup> It becomes real in being poured out, broken, given away for others. The being of Christ is being as gift. The substance (*ousia*) of the Eucharist is always our daily (*epiousion*) bread; it is offered anew in every Eucharistic act. Like manna, it cannot be hoarded. We must constantly receive our being anew from the Holy Spirit, and in turn give it away in mission.

#### **IV. Practicing the Body of Christ**

What we have, then, is a vision of the liturgy that is considerably more grand than the liturgy as reminder of certain truths that the individual takes out into the social realm. The liturgy calls us into a new social reality, the Body of Christ on earth. But this grand vision doesn’t seem to accord very well with life back home. “We are identified with Christ? We are the firstfruits of the new creation? Have you ever been to my church?” This vision of the church as the Body of Christ can seem to put too much confidence in the church; it smacks of triumphalism. But this is a misunderstanding. The biblical and patristic writers

were not dealing with a better bunch of Christians than the motley collection of foolish, sinful, and mediocre people like us that line our pews. The whole reality of the Body of Christ is an absolute and radical dependence on Christ, and not on our own efforts. Everything the church is and does it *receives* in Christ through the Holy Spirit. And the reality of being Christ's sacrificial Body induces not ecclesiastical narcissism but self-emptying for the life of the world.

This vision of the church as Christ's Body is not a call to heroism, but should rather encourage communities of Christians to put what in many cases they are already doing into a larger cosmic context. Each congregation's small attempts to visit the sick and imprisoned, to operate a soup kitchen free of consideration of who deserves what, to care for women in crisis pregnancies, to raise the voice of God's "no" to war – all these small efforts are taken up into the grand cosmic drama of sin and reconciliation enacted in the liturgy. We see that our works are not just nibbling at the edges of a massive structure of injustice, but are in fact at the hopeful heart of God's work on earth. We are not resigned to be idealists in the face of the world's supposed "realism," but rather we witness to the way things really are in the eyes of God. At the same time that we are filled with hope, we are also relieved of responsibility for making history come out right, knowing that history is in God's hands. It is this crushing sense of responsibility for the world's injustice that turns activists bitter, and turns countries towards war.

This vision of our work taken up into God's work in the liturgy can do a great deal at the local level to put together the scattered pieces of a

congregation's life. The liturgy committee and the social justice committee can work together on the assumption that the liturgy committee is doing more than simply trying to find better reminders of what the social justice committee already knows. This vision also has the potential to bring so-called "conservatives" together with so-called "liberals." The enactment of the Body of Christ in the Eucharist, as we have seen, is a very traditional theological theme, and sounds reassuringly old-fashioned. At the same time, the implications for the church's mission can be quite radical.

Let me give some examples of how the church can take more seriously its social reality as the Body of Christ. My parish in St. Paul supports – along with other Protestant and Catholic churches in the Twin Cities – a cooperative of family farmers who practice organic farming and sustainable agriculture. Parishioners order food directly from the farmers, and the church serves as a drop-off point. The farmers benefit from cutting out middlemen, and parishioners benefit from good produce and a closer connection to the land. There is certainly much in the Eucharistic celebration to symbolize and remind us of this connection, e.g., the "fruit of the vine and the work of human hands." What matters, however, is that the community gathered by the Eucharist creates a social space in which a kind of Eucharistic economy can take place, an economy based not on competition but on the membership of all in the same body. The Eucharist is not simply a reminder but an enactment of a certain kind of communal space.

My second example will perhaps be more controversial. During the lead up to the Iraq War, leaders of virtually every major Christian body (with the exception of Southern Baptists) voiced their opposition to the war. In the Catholic Church the Pope, the Curia, and the Bishops worldwide were nearly unanimous in their judgment that the war would not be just, and voiced that opposition on many occasions. Prominent politically conservative Catholics – Michael Novak, George Weigel, Richard John Neuhaus, for example – found themselves in the unaccustomed position of advocating for the freedom of the Catholic conscience to dissent from the Pope’s position on the war. Novak and Weigel published pieces in the *Times* of London, *America* magazine, and elsewhere arguing that the Pope’s opinion should be respected, but the President makes the final call on the morality of the war, and Catholics ought to defer judgment to the President. In actual fact, that’s precisely what most American Catholics did. Most supported the war, at least initially, and very few Catholics in the military raised questions about its status as an unjust war. This was, and continues to be, the case in most Christian denominations.

How could we in this case take the church seriously as a social body in its own right formed by the liturgy? It would imply more than simply “reading” the liturgy as symbolizing God’s “no” to violence, and then, for example, writing one’s congressman or resolving to vote for someone opposed to the war. These might be good things, but the church as social body remains irrelevant. For it is the church itself as Body of Christ that is God’s “no” to violence. It would involve instead a more fundamental shift of allegiances from the nation to the Body of

Christ. It would imply regarding the Body of Christ as our primary social body, and the nation as secondary. It would mean refusing to defer judgment on the morality of war to the President, and giving primary weight to the discernment of the whole worldwide church and its leaders. It would mean remembering that the Body of Christ is catholic, universal, and transgresses the borders of nation-states to embrace all nations, including Iraq, where nearly a million Christians reside. And this remembering is not merely an individual mental act, but a remembering of the body, a gathering together of the members of the Body of Christ into a visible social body. This involves protest, a presence of the church in the streets and a witness in the halls of power, and most basically a refusal of Christians to fight and support a war about which church leaders have raised such grave concerns. This is not a call to directly politicize the liturgy, to inject partisan political commentary into the prayers of the faithful, for example. It is a call, however, to make socially visible and tangible God's "no" to violence in the liturgy, lest all our pretty prayers for peace be mere words.

Let me be clear: the problem is not just that there are disagreements in the church over how to pursue justice and peace. The problem is not that the laity and the bishops are not marching in lockstep. Any incarnation of the Body of Christ in concrete reality will involve risks and disagreements. The problem is that many Christians, like Neuhaus and Weigel, assume that the American Christian's primary authority in matters of war is America, not the Body of Christ. The majority of Christians in America allow this to be their position. The solution to this problem lies in the way conflicts should be resolved. When there are

disagreements over social embodiment, we should try to resolve them as a body. Those who support or oppose Christian participation in war should have to argue Eucharistically. We need arguments on why or why not war in Iraq is consonant with our liturgical reality. We do not need to be told “Just trust the president.”

I’ve made all kinds of large statements in this talk that beg for further elaboration. When I have spoken of the church and the Body of Christ, for example, I have been concerned to speak of the center of these realities and not their boundaries. We must always be cautious not simply to identify the Body of Christ with the visible institutional church. Dorothy Day always spoke of the “members or potential members of the Body of Christ,” such that the full eschatological reality of the church is never simply within our grasp. We collaborate with Christians and non-Christians alike, in the knowledge that the Holy Spirit blows where she will, and in the hope that the Holy Spirit will unite us all.

At the same time I have tried to speak of the Christian tradition’s excitement over the fact that the liturgy does in fact make Christ’s reconciling presence a social reality in the world. As Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard writes

In virtue of its sacrificial nature, the church cannot be a servant of the world. It is the priest of the love of God in and for the world... It is not possible to confuse the church with a group simply following the “example of Christ,” who would be its ethics teacher, having bequeathed to it norms of behavior. It is, in the world and for eternity, infinitely more: it is the fruit produced in concrete life by that great letting go of self that the sacrifice of the Lord was and continues to be in his members, his branches, his priesthood, and his “priestly house.”<sup>31</sup>

The liturgy is God’s transformation of social reality in and for the world. And if God does not transform reality, it ain’t gonna happen.

---

<sup>1</sup> For example, Don Saliers, "Liturgy and Ethics: Some New Beginnings" in *Liturgy and the Moral Self: Humanity at Full Stretch Before God*, ed. E. Byron Anderson and Bruce Morrill (Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical Press, 1998), 15-35.

<sup>2</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, "Editorial: Liturgy and the Body" in *Concilium* 1995/3, ed. Louis-Marie Chauvet and François Kabasele Lumbala (London: SCM Press).

<sup>3</sup> Keith Pecklers, SJ, *Worship* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 164.

<sup>4</sup> Don Saliers, *Worship as Theology: Foretaste of Glory Divine* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), 126-7.

<sup>5</sup> Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: The Eucharist and the Church in the Middle Ages* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2006), especially 249.

<sup>6</sup> *Didache*, 9, in Maxwell Staniforth, trans., *Early Christian Writings* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1968), 231.

<sup>7</sup> Mazza, 81-3. Also see Gerhard Lohfink, *Does God Need the Church?*, trans. Linda Maloney (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999), 51-60.

<sup>8</sup> Jean-Marie-Roger Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Mazza, 90-2.

<sup>10</sup> Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechesis* 4.3.

<sup>11</sup> Augustine, Sermon 272, in Edmund Hill, ed., *Sermons of St. Augustine*, vol. 7, 300-1.

<sup>12</sup> Sermon Denis 6, quoted in Tillard, 43. Tillard notes that some question whether this sermon was in fact from Augustine himself, but it is certainly Augustinian in flavor.

<sup>13</sup> John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985), 27-65.

<sup>14</sup> Mazza, 158.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *For the Life of the World* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 15.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>17</sup> Pecklers, 13.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 53-6.

<sup>19</sup> "Eucharist is 'God's Absolute "No" to Violence': 3<sup>rd</sup> Lenten Sermon by Father Cantalamessa," March 11, 2005, zenit.org at [www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=67655](http://www.zenit.org/english/visualizza.phtml?sid=67655)

<sup>20</sup> Augustine, Sermon 227, in Hill, ed., vol. 6, 255.

<sup>21</sup> Ignatius of Antioch, *Epistle to the Romans* 4, in Staniforth, ed., 104.

<sup>22</sup> *The Martyrdom of Polycarp* 15, in Staniforth, ed., 161.

<sup>23</sup> Ignatius, *Epistle to the Romans* 4, in Staniforth, ed., 104, and *Martyrdom of Polycarp* 14, in Staniforth, ed., 161. See also Mazza, 103-05, 134-7.

<sup>24</sup> Cyprian, Letter 58.1, quoted in Mazza, 136-7.

<sup>25</sup> Augustine, *The City of God* 10.6, trans. Marcus Dods (New York: Modern Library, 1950), 310.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Cesare Girardo, SJ, "The Eucharist as *Diakonia*: From the Service of Cult to the Service of Charity" in Keith Pecklers, SJ, ed., *Liturgy in a Postmodern World* (London and New York: Continuum, 2003), 102-32.

<sup>28</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, *The Eucharist: Sacrament of the Kingdom*, trans. Paul Kachur (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1988), 107.

<sup>29</sup> Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. Henry Chadwick (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991), 124 [Book VII, §16].

<sup>30</sup> Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan, SJ, and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 407.

<sup>31</sup> Tillard, 137-8.