

Caught in the Act: Karl Rahner, Brian Flanagan, and the Problem of Liturgical Failure

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This article explores the limitations of theological reasoning that have attempted to reconcile the claim of faith that the church is holy with the experience of a broken and sinful church. A recent case study from an Easter Vigil celebration shows how attention to liturgical practice can challenge assumptions that scholars have made about the church's liturgies and reframe the fundamental theological question at stake in this conversation in such a way that the declaration that the church is sinful does not necessarily negate or preclude the declaration that the church is also holy.

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Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child
Sometimes I feel like a motherless child

A long way from home, a long way from my home.
Can you hear me Church? Will you help me Church?

—Sr. Thea Bowman's Address to the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 1989

How should we speak about ecclesial failure in the church today? In June 1989, Sr. Thea Bowman stood in front of the US Bishops and began to sing. The words and melody of the old spiritual evoke the violence that tore people from their homes and families, bound them in chains, and took them in ships across the sea. And yet in this moment, Sr. Thea sang not about her ancestors but about her present community, who despite their long years of faithful struggle are “still trying to find home in

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the homeland and home in the Church.”¹ Standing in front of a sea of mostly white men, Sr. Thea praised the church especially for the way it had provided access to education for African Americans when no one else would. She described the church embodied in men’s and women’s religious communities who created space in the clergy and in religious life for African Americans when most of the church excluded them (Sr. Thea herself was the only Black member in her own religious order at the time), and she lauded those who had supported demands for civil rights and equal access for all in the American political system. But despite these occasional moments of light, Sr. Thea described her community’s everyday experience of church as unmistakably one of failure, in the streets and especially in the pews. The church, she said, had largely “insulated” itself from Black Catholics. Even when their bodies were welcomed in their pews, their songs and their culture were not. Lay and ordained ministers who served in Black communities often showed little interest in understanding Black spirituality or tradition or ritual and insisted that Black religious expression in the liturgy was not properly Catholic. African Americans, she said, were also systematically excluded from church leadership. Whether bishops, priests, or local lay leaders, they were rarely included in decision-making processes that impacted their faith communities, and their presence in the larger church was often rendered silent and invisible. While the church had evangelized African Americans, it has yet to fully welcome them into its home.

Although not all Catholics share the same experiences as Sr. Thea, for many Catholics, their experience of the church is ambiguous and contradictory—marked at once by holiness and grace but also by sin and failure. Although church leaders have long confessed the church’s holy presence in the world, they are only beginning to listen to those like Sr. Thea who speak about experiences of ecclesial failure. Eleven years after Sr. Thea stood before the US bishops, John Paul II invited Christians around the world to confess and repent of the sins of the past and to ask forgiveness from God, from the living, and from the dead.² During his pontificate, John Paul II made more than ninety statements or gestures of apologies for Catholics’ participation in past injustices, including the persecution of Jews and Muslims throughout history, for sins against indigenous American and African peoples, for sins against Orthodox and Protestant Christians, for sins against the scientific community, and for Catholics’ support of violent

¹ Thea Bowman, Address to the US Conference of Catholic Bishops, June 1989. Her address can be viewed in full at <https://www.usccb.org/media/303>.

² This event was John Paul II’s Day of Pardon liturgy, which took place on March 12, 2000, on the first Sunday of Lent during the year of Jubilee. Relevant documents from this mass can be found at https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/jubilevents/events_day_pardon_en.htm.

and oppressive political regimes.³ These public confessions raised a number of difficult theological questions about how we conceive of the presence of sin in the holy church of God. And the pope's focus on the major traumas of the past, though welcomed by many, did little to speak to the everyday ecclesial failures that mark the experiences of most Christians around the world. The contrast between Sr. Thea's remarks and the public apologies of John Paul II raises the question of ecclesial sin in a new way: How do we conceive of and account for ecclesial holiness and ecclesial failure in a way that is consistent with people's experience of the church in the world? This article explores the limitations of theological reasoning that has attempted to reconcile the claim of faith that the church is holy with the experience of a broken and sinful church through logics of ecclesial separation and argues for a theology of ecclesial sin and sanctity that reflects the everyday experiences of people of faith. By attending to the writings of Karl Rahner, Vatican II, and Brian Flanagan, I show that despite their different diagnoses and solutions to the problem of sin in the church, they all rely on logics that separate certain parts of the church from others. These logics limit the ways that we might recognize and make sense of the church's failures, big and small, in the everyday lives of its members. To illustrate this problem, I offer the story of an Easter Vigil celebration and show how Karl Rahner's theology of symbol offers an interpretive framework that resists any clear distinctions between the holiness of the church and its failures in the world.

Logics of Separation

The affirmation that the church is holy is one of the church's earliest professions of faith. At the same time, that this holy church is full of sinners comes as no great surprise to its members.⁴ Even if one's own experience in the church has not already substantiated this claim, this too is part of the early faith of the church: that Christ's grace comes to us while we are still sinners (Romans 5:8). This paradox of holiness and sinfulness in the church has long been resolved through logics of separation that isolate "the church," either in whole or in part, from the Christian faithful. Recent ecclesologies have displayed a much greater tolerance for the presence of sin in the church, but frequently fail to overcome a fundamental differentiation that separates one part of the church from another.

³ These moments are carefully documented by Luigi Accattoli in part 2 of his book *Quando il Papa Chiede Perdono* (Milan: Mondadori, 1997).

⁴ For example, see Augustine *Civitas Dei*, XV.27.

A Holy Church for Sinners

Efforts to distinguish the holiness of the church's institutions and sacraments from the sinfulness of its members emerged early in the tradition. Augustine's concern to insulate the sacrament of baptism from the sinful disposition of its minister emphasized the divine action in the sacrament rather than its human performance.⁵ This distinction grew into the medieval *ex opere operato*, which emphasized a clerical power divested from the personal purity of the minister. The power to sanctify was located in the church's institutions, offices, and rites rather than in the person of the minister whose primary obligation was to right performance or in the recipient whose primary obligation was willing reception. Imbued with God's grace, the holy church channeled and distributed this grace in and to a sinful world.⁶ This sacramental principle served an ecclesiology that similarly differentiated between the holy church (in its institutions, sacraments, and ministers) and its faithful yet sinful members: a church *for* sinners, not a church *of* sinners.

Implicit in this ecclesiology is an understanding of sin as the antithesis of holiness.⁷ Where one exists, the other must be absent. Thus, the declaration that the church is holy must also imply that the church is without sin, or at least divinely preserved from it. Bradford Hinze has described how this ecclesiology has emerged again recently through development of a robust Mariology in the writings of John Paul II, Joseph Ratzinger, Hans Urs von Balthasar, and Henri de Lubac, who all situate Mary as a type of the sinless and immaculate church: "Her sons and daughters have sinned, but not holy mother Church."⁸ What then do we make of evidence to the contrary? These ecclesiologies insulate the holiness of the church from the

⁵ Augustine, *On Baptism*, IV.10.

⁶ For an excellent treatment of the principle of *ex opere operato* and its evolution, see Antonio Eduardo Alonso, *Commodified Communion: Eucharist, Consumer Culture, and the Practice of Everyday Life* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2021), 101–06.

⁷ Definitions of sin and holiness have a long and varied tradition and do not always function in such an antithetical manner. For example, biblical notions of holiness (*kadosh*) as "set apart" from the quotidian world or distinguishing between the divine and the created may be consistent with or even include versions of this holiness/sinfulness distinction, but they encompass and give rise to other logics of separation as well. The purpose of this article is not to analyze and interrogate the adequacy of such definitions and distinctions, but rather to attend to the different ways these function within particular ecclesiological logics of sin and sanctity. For a thorough discussion of these terms, see especially Brian Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness: Sin and Sanctity in the Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018), 42–71.

⁸ Bradford E. Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," *Theological Studies* 61 (2000), 228.

sins of the faithful by separating and excluding the faithful from the church entirely. The church can then offer its holiness to them as a remedy for their sin. Through the work of its sacraments and ministers, the church is depicted as the source of salvation that reconciles sinners to God.

A Holy Church of Sinners

Although this triumphal ecclesiology, which has so imbued the church's historical understanding of itself that Karl Rahner called it "traditional," endures today, this logic of separation between the church and the faithful has been challenged.⁹ Rather than doubling down on this triumphal ecclesiology, the twentieth century saw a shift toward ecclesiologies that envisioned a church *of* believers, rather than a church *for* believers. These ecclesiologies could not as easily isolate the holiness of the church from the acts of its sinful members. Karl Rahner's writings exemplify this theological shift.¹⁰ Rahner was convinced that sinners do belong to the church and that the church is affected by their sinful actions. He grappled with the implications of this in an essay first published in 1947:

For the word "Church" signifies in this connection the visible presence of God and his grace in this world in sacramental signs, it means the historical embodiment of Christ in the here and now of the world until he comes again to "appear" in the glory of his Godhead; "Church" signifies here what is human, which while it is really distinct from what is divine is yet inseparably united with it ... "Sinner" in this article of faith signifies a person who is in reality devoid of God's grace, a person who is wandering far from God, a person whose destiny is perhaps moving with fearful consistency towards an ultimate eternal damnation. And *this* sinner belongs to *this* Church: he is not merely entered in her official register but is her member, a part of the visible presence of God's grace in the world, a member of the Body of Christ! Is this perhaps something self-evident? Is this something which is already unmistakably and without difficulty a matter of our experience? Or is this not rather a truth which in sheer incomprehensibility far outstrips anything unbelievers can bring forward in their accusations against the church and their protests at her unholiness?¹¹

⁹ Karl Rahner, "The Sinful Church in the Decrees of Vatican II," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (Baltimore: Helicon Publishing, 1969), 270–94 at 277.

¹⁰ For a thorough explication of Rahner's ecclesiology, see Richard Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995).

¹¹ Karl Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 6 (Baltimore, MD: Helicon Publishing, 1969), 253–69 at 257. Regarding the scandal of sinners in the church, also see Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 187.

Despite Rahner's affirmation that sin and holiness exist together in the church and that sinful people are a constitutive part of the holy church's tangible presence in the world, he ultimately concludes in a later essay that sin and holiness do not belong to the church in the same way. He writes, "Sin remains in her a reality which contradicts her nature, but her holiness is the manifestation of her essential being."¹² Where the church makes holiness tangible in history, Rahner finds an ecclesial enunciation and thus a revelation of the church's essential being. When sin appears in the church, Rahner finds a lie, a nonreality that distorts and veils the church's true and holy self.¹³ While Rahner presses familiar triumphalist ecclesiologies toward more humble claims of a sin-full church, he fails to completely overcome them.¹⁴ He still maintains in his own way a logic of separation between ecclesial enunciations and the enunciations of its constitutive believers and, in this, he persists in insulating the church from any subjective claim to sinfulness. By understanding sin as that which distorts the holiness of the church, Rahner still relies on a logic of separation that associates sin only with the actions of the church's constituent members rather than with acts for which the church as a whole is capable and culpable. Although the effects of these sinners on the ecclesial body are real and tangible, sin belongs fundamentally to the church's members. Accordingly, Rahner proposes a remedy that is appropriate to this diagnosis. It is in this remedy that we can most easily recognize the consequential failure of his logic of separation.

When encountering sin in the church, Rahner insists that the first response must be one of individual humility and confession by which each member recognizes the appearance of sin in the church as a reflection of their own sinful shortcomings.¹⁵ Second, Rahner suggests that when Christians endure the effects of sin in the church, they participate in the suffering of Christ that makes the conquest of sin possible.¹⁶ Together, these two remedies—confession and endurance—allow Rahner to suggest, perhaps

¹² Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 265.

¹³ For further discussion see Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 28–31.

¹⁴ More recently, Jeanmarie Gribaudo has advanced an argument that separates the holy church from its sinful members (including the hierarchy) by distinguishing between operative definitions of the church as either human or Christological in her book *A Holy, Yet Sinful Church* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2015). Although proceeding in a manner different from Rahner, Gribaudo's book is yet another example of a theology that works to diminish the gap between "church" and "members" that results in triumphal and idealized ecclesiologies, while still relying on a logic of separation that works to isolate the holy church from its sinful members.

¹⁵ Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 267.

¹⁶ Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 264.

with some degree of accuracy, that the offense Christians take upon recognizing sin in our church does not reflect our scandal that such sin is found here, but rather our resentment that we must bear sin's effects:

We are offended, for example, by the "hard-hearted clergy" not usually because they are empty of love before God, but because they give nothing to *us* or because their "failure" humiliates *our* pride in the holy Church, as whose members we appear before the heathen, and brings *us* into disrepute in the eyes of those who are without. Why do we not love the Church in such a way as to suffer humbly and silently the ignominy of her sin? That would make her holy much more effectively than our protests against the scandals in the Church, no matter how much they may often be called for and however praiseworthy they may be.¹⁷

This suggests an inconsistency in Rahner's thinking. He insists that there is no church apart from its members, and though Rahner does make space for the inclusion of sinful members in the church, ultimately, he seems unable to tolerate the idea that their sin can be attached to the ecclesial subject ("her") of the church itself. If sin is understood merely as a distortion of the essential nature of the church by its members, the distinction between church and member remains. Thus, the responsibility for such sin lies solely with the individual sinner who must both repent for their own contribution to the presence of sin in the church and silently bear the consequences of the sins of others. Rahner's solution has a certain amount of nobility if one presumes, as he seems to, that those who must bear the brunt of these sins are those who have gathered around with stones clutched in their fists, prepared to hurl them at the sins of another without first examining their own.¹⁸ And yet, those who most often bear the consequences of this sin tend to be the most vulnerable among us. Any theology of sin in the church that results in the sanctification of the silent endurance of its victims surely cannot be deemed sufficient today.

A Pilgrim Church

The Second Vatican Council fared little better than Rahner in its efforts to overcome the logics of separation that deal with sin in the church by isolating the holy church from it. The Second Vatican Council stressed a number of different ecclesiologies in its constitution on the church, speaking of the church not only in terms of its sacraments and institutions, but also as the entire community of believers. Yet once the church widened its self-

¹⁷ Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 264.

¹⁸ Rahner, "The Church of Sinners," 267–69.

understanding to include all the people of God, it also stumbled over the presence of sinners within the church itself.¹⁹ In chapter 7 of its Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, the council offered a substantive answer to the problem of the presence of sinners in the church through the eschatological image of the pilgrim.²⁰ By placing it in an eschatological frame, the constitution envisions the church as the receptive subject of the ongoing salvific work of Christ in the world: “the universal sacrament of salvation” (*universale salutis sacramentum*).²¹ Here the council depicts the church not as the source of the sinner’s salvation, but rather as its site. By imagining the ecclesial body (rather than its individual members) as a penitential pilgrim on its way to the heavenly Jerusalem, the council was able to account for both the already and the not yet of the church’s holiness. *Lumen Gentium* notes that the inclusion of sinners in the church is itself a sign that the restoration and reconciliation of sinners promised by Christ has already begun.²² Because the salvific work of God has not yet been brought to completion, the church that these sinners comprise is also still imperfect. Nevertheless, the council stopped short of recognizing in this imperfect church of sinners the possibility of a sinful church.

The hesitancy of the conciliar texts on this matter should not be construed as lack of interest in the topic at the council. Austrian bishop Stephen Laszlo was especially outspoken on the limits of this theology of the pilgrim church:

The Church cannot be understood except as the eschatological people of God, on pilgrimage through time, proclaiming the death and resurrection of the Lord until he comes. But this eschatological pilgrimage is often understood too abstractly. We might hear talk, for instance, of the difficulties and obscurities of the Church’s journey in this world. But if we speak of the pilgrim Church in the biblical sense, we understand more than that: we say the Church is on pilgrimage because in all its difficulties and miseries this people is not without fault, not without sin ...

¹⁹ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, November 21, 1964, §9–17, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html. For a substantive discussion of the plurality of ecclesial images and theologies expressed in the documents of Vatican II, see Richard Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making: Lumen Gentium, Christus Dominus, Orientalium Ecclesiarum* (New York: Paulist Press, 2006).

²⁰ This conciliar image resonates strongly with an argument Rahner made just prior to the opening of the council, which located the source of the church’s sinfulness in its rejection of the Spirit’s promptings and its refusal to change. See Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 29–30.

²¹ *Lumen Gentium*, §48.

²² *Lumen Gentium*, §48–49.

Men of this world often point out that the concrete Church is very different from the Church described by theologians and preachers. Theology seems to describe the Church of *saints*, but life itself seems to show us a Church of *sinner*s. What are we to say to this question which is very frequently asked by Christians in our day? If our answer wants to convince men of our day, it must not be compounded of triumphalism and pretense, but must be realistic and completely sincere. In other words, on this earth we may not proclaim only an ecclesiology of glory; that belongs to the end of time. When we speak of the pilgrim Church, we must always begin from an ecclesiology of the Cross.²³

For Laszlo, an ecclesiology of the cross does not suggest a distinction between the holy church and its sinful members but rather a radical *nonidentity* between Christ and the church. Unqualified claims of holiness belong to Christ, who alone is without sin. The holiness of the church on the other hand lies precisely in its identity as a sinner redeemed. A community of sinners becomes a community of penitents who boldly approach the throne of grace confident of the power of the cross to forgive even the church itself. In his speech, Laszlo did not simply propose the possibility of a sinful and penitential church; he pointed to liturgical moments where this penitential church is already being realized. When the church begins its eucharistic celebration with the Confiteor or prays “forgive us our trespasses,” he recognized that these are not merely the prayers of its individual members that somehow stand apart from and yet within the liturgy of the holy church. Rather, they are authentic utterances of the ecclesial subject who in its prayer and worship tangibly presents itself as a sinner.²⁴ The primary action of the church in this moment is not sanctifying, but confessing. Thus, Laszlo suggests, ecclesial reform ought to begin in the same way as the church opens its eucharistic liturgy: not with a recognition of the church’s continuity with the risen Christ and the proclamation of the church’s holiness, but rather with a recognition of its nonidentity with Christ and the proclamation of the church as a sinner who has come to be redeemed at the foot of the cross. Only then, Laszlo argued, can true reform begin.

In the end, Laszlo’s ecclesiology of the cross did not prevail. Although *Lumen Gentium* admitted to a church whose holiness is true but imperfect, it stopped short of claiming that this holy, but imperfect church could also

²³ Stephen Laszlo, “Sin in the Holy Church of God,” in *Council Speeches of Vatican II*, ed. Hans Küng, Yves Congar, and Daniel O’Hanlon (Glen Rock: Paulist Press, 1964), 44–48, at 44–45.

²⁴ Laszlo points to both Augustine and Thomas to support this move, but also to the liturgical collect of the fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost, which prays, “May your church be constantly cleansed and protected by your unfailing mercy, Lord.” In Laszlo, “Sin in the Holy Church of God,” 47.

be capable of sin. The bishops ultimately could not imagine a church that could hold both holiness and sinfulness as part of its true nature. Instead of a penitential church assembled before God in ecclesial confession, culpability for sin and the work of confession belongs only to the church's individual members, even when they are assembled and confessing together. This failure of imagination has continued to be a key feature of the Vatican's practical and theological reflections on this matter.

John Paul II's program of asking forgiveness for the sinful actions of the church's collective members was among the most public demonstrations of this new theological understanding.²⁵ John Paul II's statements and gestures of apology for historical failures led to concerns from many in the Vatican that his actions might suggest that the church itself had sinned.²⁶ In their 1999 report "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past," the International Theological Commission explicitly rejected the claim that the church could sin. The commission replaced the image of the pilgrim church with the Marian image that more explicitly distinguishes between holy mother church and her (sinful) children.²⁷ In reinscribing this logic of separation, it returned to an ecclesiology that once again isolates the holy church from its sinful members.²⁸

A Confessing Church

In the years following the council, the Catholic faithful have not suffered the same hesitations as their leaders in naming the presence of sin in the church. Richard Gaillardetz has suggested that the idea that the church more closely resembles its sinful members on earth rather than its saints in heaven has become the primary point of reception of the image of the pilgrim church in postconciliar Catholicism.²⁹ Brian Flanagan's recent

²⁵ See Accattoli, *Quando il Papa Chiede Perdono*.

²⁶ Alternatively, Brian Flanagan has noted that the structure of John Paul II's prayer during the Day of Pardon liturgy more closely resembles the eucharistic liturgy's universal prayers rather than its penitential rite. Brian Flanagan, "Ecclesial Holiness and Guilt," in *Contritio: Annäherungen an Schuld, Scham und Reue*, ed. Julia Exxing and Katharina Peetz, with Dorothea Wojtczak (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2017), 259–65.

²⁷ International Theological Commission, "Memory and Reconciliation: The Church and the Faults of the Past" (1999).

²⁸ For more discussion of this doctrinal development, see David N. Power, "Sinful Church, Divine Pardon," *New Theology Review* (February 2004): 57–69; Hinze, "Ecclesial Repentance and the Demands of Dialogue," 207–38; Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 147–65.

²⁹ Gaillardetz, *The Church in the Making*, 101–02.

monograph on this topic significantly advances this reception by outlining four ways sin manifests in the church: the church sins first and most familiarly in the individual actions of its members, second in the sins of its lay and ordained ministers, third in the aggregate consequences of the sinful actions of both members and ministers that become calcified in the church's institutions and structures, and finally in its collective, ecclesial actions.³⁰ His final proposal is perhaps the most provocative in that it understands the church as not simply a community of believers, but also as an active subject in the world. He writes, "If we consider that the church, like any other group, has the potential to act as a plural subject or engage in shared activity, and that in doing so there is something different from simply an aggregate of individual actions, a whole that is greater than or at least different from its parts, then the possibility of that action being sinful must be considered."³¹ For Flanagan, the distinction between the church as a community and the church as subject and agent does not function to isolate the holiness of the church from the effects of its members, but rather to suggest its potential to act as a church in ways akin to its individual members, who themselves are capable of both great love and great failure of love. This failure of love, both of God and of neighbor, is Flanagan's operative understanding of individual as well as ecclesial sin. His ecclesiology overcomes previous logics of separation inasmuch as it moves beyond the Rahnerian and conciliar conceptions of the church as *sin-full*—that is, full of sinful members—to the recognition of the church itself as *sinner*.

In his classic work *On Liturgical Theology*, Aidan Kavanagh argued that in the liturgy, the church is "caught in the act of being most overtly itself."³² This idea was also implicit in Lazlo's argument at the Second Vatican Council where he caught the church in the liturgical act of confession before the cross of Christ. Flanagan's assertion that there are certain events that are best conceived of in terms of the ecclesial "we" finds a close resonance with liturgical theologies like these that posit the liturgical assembly as

³⁰ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 102–37.

³¹ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 131.

³² Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1992), 75; quoted in Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 13. The beginning of Vatican II's Constitution on the Liturgy makes essentially the same claim. "For the liturgy, through which the work of our redemption is accomplished ... is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church." Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (Sacrosanctum Concilium)*, December 4, 1963, §2, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html.

ecclesial actor. Fittingly drawing on these two thinkers, Flanagan argues that if we take the Confiteor and Our Father prayers prayed in the context of the church's eucharistic liturgy seriously as ecclesial actions and not merely as the individual confessions of the believers gathered for prayer, then the logic of this liturgy demands that we presume the church is confessing honestly and it initiates a process of discernment to recognize the ways in which the church has sinned in the world.

Flanagan's prediction that the presence of a confessing church reveals the presence of a church capable of sin finds powerful confirmation in his examples of the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris in 1570 and the Rwandan Genocide in 1994, where men, women, and children were "murdered by Catholics acting as a Catholic 'we'—acting together as church, however misguided or wrong that action might have been."³³ In these two historical examples, the church is caught in the act, so to speak, of unspeakable atrocities. Flanagan catches the same ecclesial "we" that stood with fidelity before God in the liturgy as a confessing sinner failing spectacularly in Paris and Rwanda. And what the liturgy reveals, it also redeems. Once again, the remedy for sin in the church fits well with the diagnosis. The liturgy begins with confession, but it ends with communion. In its celebration and reception of the Eucharist, Flanagan argues, the sinful church is made holy.³⁴

In establishing the eucharistic celebration as both revelation and site of salvation, where the church can enter as sinner and be transformed into a saint, Flanagan emphasizes the space of the liturgy as holy activity. The sanctifying actions of the liturgy are presented as the antithesis of the church's sinful actions in the world. Liturgical action, Flanagan writes, "can function as an interruption of evident evils like sexism, racism, classism, and heterosexism, as well as the more subtle flaws of mutual indifference and estrangement between communities in an increasingly atomized and self-sorting world."³⁵ Except when it doesn't.

In distinguishing between a sinful church outside the liturgy and a faithful, penitential church within the liturgy, Flanagan relies on a logic of separation that isolates the church at prayer from the sinful church in the world, without seriously considering the possibility of ecclesial failure within the liturgy itself. Flanagan's liturgical theology rests on an idealized celebration of the liturgy that is more imagined than verifiable in practice. And he is not alone.³⁶ The

³³ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 132.

³⁴ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 17–25.

³⁵ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 18.

³⁶ Both Kathryn Tanner and Teresa Berger have identified "unrealistic assumptions about Christian practices to which academic theologians are inclined by the intellectual

tendency of theologians to posit the liturgy as a solution to whatever social ill or -ism that has caught our attention has been a regular and pervasive pattern since Vatican II's claim that the Eucharist is both source and summit of the church's life.³⁷ As Robert Hovda has observed, "The growing gap between the rich and the poor in our country is nothing compared to the gap between the liturgy as it is talked about in conferences and the liturgy as it is experienced in the Sunday assembly."³⁸ This idealization most frequently arises from a liturgical theology that is primarily textual, reflecting only on the *ordo* and written prayers of the celebration rather than its full performance. These theologies of the liturgy are narrow in their scope, seeing "liturgy" as inclusive of only those elements prescribed in the texts, and they often assume a more or less universal enactment of these elements across liturgical assemblies. This is most evident when Flanagan acknowledges that our liturgies are not "somehow free from the same dynamics of sin and sanctity to be addressed throughout this book," but fails to account for these liturgical failures as ecclesial failures.³⁹

Liturgical scholars have argued for some time that this approach is insufficient and that liturgy must be more properly understood as a fully enacted performance. Lawrence Hoffman was among the first to raise concerns about the limited view of the liturgy that a textual perspective presents when he criticized scholars for confusing the texts of prayers with the act of actually praying.⁴⁰ In his classic phrase, he encouraged liturgical scholars to move "beyond the text" of our liturgical prayers and to place these texts within the liturgy's ritual performance.⁴¹ And while Hoffman's challenge did broaden the study of liturgical texts in the scholarly community to include ritual rubrics and *ordos*, liturgical reflection remains deeply tied to liturgical

investments of their own enterprises." Kathryn Tanner, "Theological Reflection and Christian Practices," in *Practicing Theology*, ed. Miroslav Volt and Dorothy Bass (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2002), 228–29. See also Teresa Berger, "Breaking Bread in a Broken World," *Studia Liturgica* 36 (2006): 80.

³⁷ For further discussion of this pattern, see especially chapter 1 in Antonio A. Alonso's *Commodified Communion*.

³⁸ Robert Hovda, "Liturgy Forming Us in the Christian Life," in *Liturgy and Spirituality in Context: Perspectives on Prayer and Culture*, ed. Eleanor Bernstein (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 139.

³⁹ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 13.

⁴⁰ Lawrence Hoffman, *Beyond the Text* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 6.

⁴¹ Hoffman, *Beyond the Text*, 19. On page 16, Flanagan is attentive to this critique and closely follows Hoffman's method of attending not only to the words of the liturgy, but also the ritual context in which they are spoken, drawing substantively on the liturgical rubrics as well as the scripted texts.

texts. More recently, Siobhan Garrigan has commented on how frequently scholars and theologians reach conclusions based on liturgical arguments without ever fully describing liturgies as they are actually celebrated.⁴² Liturgies, Garrigan argues, are not only the reenactment of a universal script, they are also the particular celebrations of real communities of faith. Failure to account for this particularity results in conclusions that are at best incomplete, and at worst unable to account for the ways that liturgy is frequently experienced by the people who celebrate it. It produces liturgical theologies that are largely insulated from the actual experiences of the church as church.

Flanagan's ecclesiology of the confessing church flows from a liturgical theology based only on the church's liturgical texts.⁴³ This is not inappropriate; it is simply incomplete. In the current ecclesial climate, it is tempting to look to the church's sacramental liturgies as the revelation of the church's best self, as the confessing church, faithful, reconciled, and redeemed, especially when this contrast helps us see the ways that the church falls short in its mission in the world. And yet, as recent books by Antonio Alonso and Lauren Winner have demonstrated, our liturgical celebrations are often deeply embedded in and expressive of the sin that marks both our church and our world, even though theologians frequently fail to talk about this.⁴⁴ This can result in liturgical theologies and liturgical ecclesiologies that often don't fully match our experience of the liturgy or the church. Although this can (and often does!) suggest a problem with the liturgical performance, when our theologies are not adequate to our experience of the world, it also points to a problem with our interpretation.

Flanagan's examples of ecclesial failure in Rwanda and Paris are instructive in their clarity, but he insists they differ only in degree and not in kind from the many instances, both past and present, of ecclesial failure.⁴⁵ The absence of accompanying examples of more mundane ecclesial failures in Flanagan's work does not suggest that he is unconcerned with this, and he nods to the reality of everyday failure without ever attending fully to it.⁴⁶ In so doing, Flanagan's work prompts further theological reflection on the ordinary and everyday failures of the church in the world, as well as theologies that can make sense of these failures even within the context of the

⁴² Siobhan Garrigan, *Beyond Ritual* (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 2004), 29.

⁴³ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 9–41, 100–01, 177–79.

⁴⁴ Alonso, *Commodified Communion*; Lauren Winner, *The Dangers of Christian Practice* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018).

⁴⁵ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 131–33.

⁴⁶ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 13.

church's sacramental liturgies. In the following pages, I argue that accounting for these liturgical failures can lead to a fuller account of the church's failure in the world, one that includes not only great tragedy but the everyday ecclesial failures that mark many people's experiences of church while at the same time continuing to resist logics that make sense of sin in the church by dividing one part of the church from another.

A Specific Example

Flannagan's positing of a church as a subjective actor capable of sin is clarified in his specific examples of ecclesial failure in the St. Bartholomew's Day Massacre and the Rwandan Genocide. This same specificity is helpful in considering how we might understand the church's liturgy in light of a sinful church and how that liturgy might reveal the church itself. I offer one particularly instructive example here. The context for this liturgical celebration is a large, urban Catholic parish of about two thousand families, but in practice this parish had functioned for years as two separate communities. English speakers and Spanish speakers celebrated separate liturgies and were also divided for faith formation, sacramental preparation, and other parish life ministries. The two communities even had separate pastoral staffs. While parish registration records indicated that about half of the parish membership was Spanish speaking, liturgies celebrated in Spanish often attracted a larger assembly than the English-language liturgies. When the parish constructed a new and larger church building in 2009, they built it next to the previous building rather than on the same site. This created space for multiple liturgies and programming to occur at the parish simultaneously, with the Spanish-speaking community often gathering in the old and smaller church building when the English-speaking community was using the new. In the spring of 2014, the parish was preparing to welcome more than one hundred people between the English and Spanish-speaking communities to the Easter sacraments. While the practice in the parish since 2009 was to utilize the two church buildings to celebrate separate but simultaneous Triduum liturgies in English and Spanish, this year would be different. Several weeks before Easter, the parish announced its intention to celebrate parts of the Easter Vigil liturgy as one, unified community.

The liturgy began that Saturday evening with the entire community gathered around the Easter fire in the parking lot between the old and new buildings. At the conclusion of the opening rites, the community lit their candles and divided in two: one group processed together into the old church building and, seated in folding chairs, began the Liturgy of the Word in Spanish.

The remaining worshipers, led by the paschal candle, entered the new building, settled into the pews, and began the Liturgy of the Word in English. Instead of celebrating the Liturgy of the Word together bilingually, with the proclamation of the scriptures alternating between English and Spanish, the Liturgy of the Word took place separately but simultaneously, with each community hearing the story of salvation proclaimed in their own language and responding back in kind.

At the conclusion of the Liturgy of the Word, the Spanish-speaking congregation joined the English-speakers in the newer (and larger) building to celebrate the Easter sacraments. This coming together was carefully orchestrated. Ushers at the doors of each building, equipped with that modern miracle—the cell phone—kept regular contact with their brothers and sisters across the parking lot, checking to see that each liturgy was proceeding at roughly the same pace. When the pastor had concluded his homily in English and the assistant pastor had concluded his homily in Spanish, the Spanish-speaking congregation processed across the parking lot, led by a cross lifted high and their baptismal elect, to join the English-speaking congregation in the new building. But when they arrived, they found that the predominantly white, English-speaking congregation had already spread out across all the pews of the new building. Coats and purses were scattered across the benches, half-burned candles were tucked alongside hymnals in the back of each pew, children whose bedtimes had long ago passed were stretched out in the empty spaces between families sound asleep. There was no room for anyone else.

The new arrivals from across the parking lot attempted to join this already seated assembly by standing in the side aisles and in the back of the sanctuary, even spilling into the foyer beyond the large glass doors that opened into the sanctuary proper. Although there was some half-hearted shifting in the pews so that the occasional *abuela* could sit down, little else was done to make space as the choir chanted the litany of the saints, and the English-speaking elect processed down the aisle from the front of the church to the back, led by their own cross aloft, to meet their Spanish-speaking counterparts at the baptismal font.

After leading the elect in making their baptismal confession of faith, the two parish priests climbed into the baptismal font together and welcomed, two by two, those who would be baptized. Similarly clad brown-robbed elect, some as young as seven years old and others closer to seventy, climbed into the font and knelt together in the water between the two priests. The familiar formula rang out over and over as water streamed over their heads, first in English, then in Spanish:

[Name], *I baptize you in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.*

[Nombre], *Yo te bautizo, en el nombre del Padre, y del Hijo, y del Espíritu Santo.*

By the end of the rite, the rugs to each side of the font where the newly baptized exited were sopping wet, and a failure to fully anticipate the amount of water that would be displaced by four grown adults in the font at once meant that a substantial stream of living water had begun to flow down the center aisle toward the altar in a slick, yet glorious eschatological allusion.

A brief intermission was required at this point, so the newly baptized and the clergy could dry off. This also provided an opportunity for those already seated to reconsider their occupation of the parish pews, but only small efforts were made to create more room. Some families moved closer together, gathering their belongings into piles and occasionally pulling children onto their laps. Small spaces opened up at the ends of many of the pews. Spanish-speaking families were seated, if they were lucky, in front and behind one another. Yet, the original effect remained. Brown bodies, both seated and standing, ringed the edge of the congregation, with the pews still occupied almost entirely by the mostly Anglo, English-speaking community. The church remained standing room only, but only for certain members of the congregation.

Once both neophytes and clergy had been reclathed in dry, white albs and several men and woman had appeared with armfuls of towels to dry the center aisle, the formulaic pattern repeated as one by one, the newly baptized, joined at this point by those baptized Christians entering the Catholic communion, processed forward. This time the feel of the water was replaced by the touch of the priest and the unmistakable smell of balsam. The chrism was traced over and over on their foreheads again with alternating formulas:

[Name], *be sealed with the gift of the Holy Spirit.*

[Nombre], *recibe por esta señal el don del Espíritu Santo.*

The liturgy concluded with the celebration of the Eucharist, prayed almost entirely in English, before the community was dismissed with the fifteen-syllable Easter Alleluia. As many departed, the newly initiated gathered on the steps at the foot of the altar for pictures continually interrupted by hugs and shouts of congratulations. It was early in the morning by the time the last ones had departed the church.

On this night, all over the world, Roman Catholic churches celebrated the Great Vigil through the enactment of a common *ordo*. By reflecting on this *ordo*, we can anticipate and imagine the many ways that these

churches realize and make present the holiness of God in and through their liturgical acts. We might delight in the way the living Word will become incarnated in the languages of the people of God and recognize the living face of Christ in those who will administer the sacraments, in the soon to be initiated, in the assembly gathered together in darkness to celebrate God's triumph and to worship the God of Glory. We can sense the Spirit moving in the crackling flames of the Easter fire and the flowing waters of baptism, see Christ in the bread and wine lifted high above the altar, touch and taste Christ as we receive that same bread and wine in our hands and on our tongue. When liturgy functions at its best, these elements harmonize with one another to create rich textures of holy presence: the assembly singing the words of the psalms, the priest pouring water over a kneeling body, the eucharistic minister presenting the bread to a communicant and announcing "the Body of Christ." The celebration of the Easter Vigil liturgy realizes divine presence and grace in a special way when, in the midst of the assembly, new Christians profess the faith of the church and enter the font to share in Christ's death, resurrection, and promise of new life in the church. But this is not all there is to say about this liturgical celebration. To reflect only on the *ordo* is to miss the particular ways that God's holiness was manifest in the liturgical actions of *this* congregation on *this* night in 2014.

This liturgy began with a community united around the flames of the Easter fire before it separated for the Liturgy of the Word. And yet, what was divided by space and language was united in time and by the sacred story of salvation. In two separate buildings on the same parish campus, the living Word of God and the grace of salvation became incarnated in not one, but two human languages that night.

When the communities came together for the celebration of the Easter sacraments, the font itself became both a site of salvation for the ones who entered it as well as a powerful sign of unity in Christ as each of the elect was baptized side by side, with the same water, and using the same formula, but with different words. The expression of the same sacraments in the distinct languages of the two communities, celebrated together in time and space, allowed the church to experience and embody a grace that transcended and healed the racial divisions in and around them.

In these moments, we glimpse not only the presence of Christ but the presence of the church caught in the act of being most overtly itself. Caught up in the gracious holiness of God, the sanctifying work of the church reveals the church to itself. The story of salvation, which is also the story of the failure of the people of God not only as individuals but also as a people, is another example of ecclesial confession that is, as Flanagan

notes, good news!⁴⁷ And these stories became the stories of these people and this assembly as they were proclaimed in the particular languages of the people gathered together. The story of salvation took on the face of the local church at the font where the sinful church gathered at the foot of the cross and together rejected evil, professed their faith in the living God, and entered the waters of baptism. When the newly baptized reemerged and marched down the aisle together, each sporting the same damp hair and clothed in the same white baptismal robe, they became the face of the church revealed to itself. In these actions, the church did indeed transcend the evils of racism embedded in our society and in the parish community itself. In this liturgical activity, the holiness of the church was revealed and made present in a particular way in the midst of this assembly gathered together in this time and place: a sinner standing at the foot of the cross and made holy through the waters of baptism.

But on this night, these holy actions found strange dissonance with other actions of the assembly in which they took place. The unity of the baptismal font was at odds with the ways the church was assembled in voice and pew. The liturgy began with the communities divided, the larger of the two communities relegated first to the older church building and its folding chairs for their celebration of the Word of God, and then to the perimeter of the newer space without anywhere to sit at all. The racism of the world beyond the liturgy that so frequently marginalizes the Hispanic community in the United States also permeated this liturgical activity. Whereas English and Spanish speakers entered the font together and kneeled side by side to receive the sacrament, the Spanish-speaking community entered the church building after the English-speaking community and was allowed only the space left over after the first assembly had been seated. When the newly baptized marched together in their white baptismal robes down the center of the church toward the altar, they marched down a center aisle lined mostly with light-skinned, English-speaking parishioners. The other half of the church stood in the margins of the space, straining to catch a glimpse of their family and friends over the heads of those already seated in the pews. While the assembly heard the formulas of baptism and confirmation in the two languages of the people, the Eucharist was celebrated almost entirely in English, and songs familiar to the English-speaking community dominated the remainder of the liturgy. Reflecting the gathered assembly in the pews, Spanish language and music was not absent from the eucharistic celebration, but neither was it present in equal measure. Rather than interrupting the evils of racism and mutual

⁴⁷ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 107.

indifference, some of the church's liturgical actions this night manifested and consecrated them.

When Lazslo and Flanagan turned to the church's eucharistic liturgy, they caught the church confessing its sins, sins that were revealed and discerned against the backdrop of the enactment of the holy ordo of the liturgy. Looking beyond the ordo, we catch the church not in the act of confessing, but in the act of sinning, of failing precisely as church in and through the action of the liturgical assembly. The holiness of the church shone out powerfully in this liturgy in ways that well exceeded the prescriptions of the liturgical texts, while in other ways the church failed significantly in their liturgical performance even as they kept closely to the ordo for the celebration. When outlined against a backdrop of the sacramental grace of the baptismal celebration on this holy night, the racial marginalization and exclusion in voice and pew were recognizable by their contrast to the words proclaimed from the ambo and by their incompatibility with the action taking place in the font. Against a backdrop of grace, racism could be recognized for what it is: a failure of love that mocks the gracious holiness of God. At the same time, the unity expressed in the acts of washing and anointing did indeed interrupt the failures of this church assembled in prayer, even though it failed to fully overcome them. Against the backdrop of sin, the church proceeding from the font is also revealed as the holy, redeemed one of God. In this liturgical celebration, the church's holy and sinful actions simultaneously reveal one another. Only in the fullness of this liturgical celebration do we catch the church in the act of being most overtly itself.

The ambiguous and even contradictory nature of the church revealed in this Easter Vigil celebration resists logics that make sense of sin in the church by distinguishing between the holy church and its sinful members or even between the church in mission and the church at prayer.

How then might we make sense of the contradictory church revealed in this vigil liturgy? Although Rahner's earlier theological conclusions regarding sin in the church have ultimately proved inadequate in this regard, it is possible that his theology of the symbol, first published on the eve of the Second Vatican Council, points to an interpretation of sin and sanctity in the church that Rahner did not ultimately pursue.

A Theology of Symbol

The language of symbol in theological discourse is varied and multivalent, so it is helpful to begin by clarifying how the term is used here. Rahner's theology of symbol proceeds from his view of creation and history as fundamentally graced. Beginning with the revelation that God is self-communicating

love, Rahner suggests that both humanity and creation are structured in a way that makes the reception of God's love possible.⁴⁸ For humanity, this prospect of divine friendship is made possible through the anthropological unity of body and spirit that allows a spiritual relationship between God and God's people made known in and through the tangible, concrete manifestations of the world in which we live, the events that constitute one's individual and social history, one's relationships, and even one's own body.⁴⁹ This divine, self-communicating love or grace imbues creation; it is the very first tangible result of God's self-communicating love that spoke the world into being.

Rahner's theology of symbol is informed by this sacramental premise that sees creation as symbolically structured in such a way to facilitate a self-communicating love between God and the world.⁵⁰ Distinguishing the theological act of symbolizing from more derivative or mundane uses of symbol that posit it as a representation of a referent object or idea, Rahner argues that a symbol's referent is an active *subject*.⁵¹ The relation between the subject (that which is signified) and the symbol (the signifier) positions the two as objectively distinct (the symbol is something other than the signified) but also intimately related. Therefore, a symbol is that concrete action or event in which the signified performatively expresses itself and in so doing manifests or becomes that which it desires to be. Rahner finds justification for such a claim of reality within the divine itself, who by the act of speaking or expressing itself caused creation to come into being.⁵² He understands

⁴⁸ Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith: An Introduction to the Idea of Christianity* (New York: Crossroad, 1990), 124.

⁴⁹ Rahner's anthropology starts from a view of the human person as an existential unity of body and spirit, of the historical and the transcendental. Rahner refers to these two dimensions of the human person as the transcendent and categorical poles. See especially Rahner, *Foundations of Christian Faith*, 75–82, 129, 171–75.

⁵⁰ Rahner lays out his fullest explication of the concept of the symbol as the fundamental structure of Christian reality in his essay "Zur Theologie des Symbols," published in 1959 and later translated as "The Theology of the Symbol." He plays out this idea of the symbol in his 1961 book *The Church and the Sacraments* and 1979 essay *On the Theology of Worship*. The notion of symbol plays a more subtle role in his essay "The Church of the Saints" (1955), which I read as an important development of his theology of symbol.

⁵¹ Karl Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4 (New York: Crossroad, 1973), 221–51 at 224–25.

⁵² Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 236–41. Richard Lennan describes the connection between Rahner's theology of revelation and his theology of symbol this way: "The physical object which could be experienced immediately—the 'categorical'—was to be understood as the symbol of a deeper reality—the 'transcendental'"; Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 20.

creation not as the result or product of God's utterance, but as divine enunciation spoken into time and space. Creation is at once something other than the divine and at the same time the self-expression of the divine through which God is made present in history and becomes that which God desires to be: the Creator. Therefore, creation is a symbol of the divine through which God really becomes the Creator in concrete time and space, and through which other beings—ourselves—can come to know God, the subject of creation, as Creator.

The creative grace of promise and possibility realized in the moment of creation reaches its most perfect expression and fulfillment in the incarnation of Christ, the "absolute symbol of God in the world."⁵³ In the moment of the Incarnation, humanity is not something that God takes on as if it is somehow alien to Godself. Rather, Rahner writes, in this divine enunciation, "The very thing that appears is what we call the humanity of the Logos."⁵⁴ The Incarnation is not only the self-communication of God to the world (revelation) but also the "expressive presence" of who God wished to be for the world (salvation). Just as in the moment of creation, so too in the Incarnation God became something real and particular; the salvation that was once only promise and possibility now becomes a permanent and enduring reality in the humanity of Jesus Christ. The Incarnation is further evidence that the ongoing symbolic manifestation of grace has as its referent not an abstract concept—salvation—but rather a real-ized God. This salvific grace constitutes a real, present, and enduring reality in this world that must again and again take concrete historical form through symbolic action.

Rahner's theological reasoning offers us three key insights: 1) reality itself has a symbolic structure that proceeds from the expressive, self-communicative nature of the triune God; 2) the referent of a symbol is not an arbitrarily determined object or abstract idea but rather an active subject; it is not a what, but a who; and 3) symbolic action is not merely revelatory, it also constitutes the subject in time and space. To speak of the symbol then is to speak of the holy and salvific presence of God in our midst. For Rahner, God's grace becomes historically and continually concrete in the historical extension of the Christ-event that is the church, and in individual, everyday lives in which people experience and concretely respond to God's gracious initiative.

⁵³ Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 237. For a discussion of symbol in Rahner's Christology, see especially Joseph H. P. Wong, *Logos-Symbol in the Christology of Karl Rahner* (Rome: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 1984), 113–84; Annice Callahan, *Karl Rahner's Spirituality of the Pierced Heart: A Reinterpretation of Devotion of the Sacred Heart* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1985), 32–53.

⁵⁴ Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 239.

Humanity as Symbol and Subject

Rahner's logic of symbol gives rise to a theological anthropology that constitutes humanity as the *imago Dei*. Through the creative action of God and especially through the Incarnation, humanity itself becomes the symbolic expression of the divine. In our very nature, which is at once created, free, fallen, and redeemed, humanity is the realization of the divine image and constitutive of God in history.⁵⁵ Just as humanity cannot be but for the utterance of God, God in uttering humanity also constitutes and realizes Godself. We see this clearly in the Incarnation, where God is realized and made known in that which is other from God—humanity. To put it more radically, God cannot be who God is apart from humanity.

As the image of God, humanity is not only a symbol of the triune God but also shares in God's subjective and symbolic nature of being. Like our creator, human beings manifest and constitute themselves in the world and in history through their actions and utterances.⁵⁶ A scholar constitutes herself not by declaring it so, but by her practice. The desire to become a scholar is brought to fulfillment through study, writing, publishing, teaching, and the like. This activity is symbolic, for it realizes one's personal desire by its outward expression and thus constitutes a person as a scholar recognizable both to themselves and to those around them. The conferral of an academic degree or the practice of addressing persons by their academic title are recognitions of the permanent and enduring reality of one's identity as a scholar. At the same time, the continuing activity of the scholar beyond the conferral of degree and title extends the concrete manifestation of this reality into the present moment.

Similarly, we might think about the practices and activities that constitute the Christian life. The convention of referring to the Christian faithful as "practitioners" is apt. Christian practice is not only expressive, but also constitutive of practitioners as they realize themselves as Christians through their engagement with (and not necessarily only adherence to) the practical logics of the Christian life. Setting aside the question of whether a subject or being can exist in some sense in the abstract, we can at least affirm that the subject remains merely a possibility until it manifests itself concretely in time and space. This symbolic reality of the subject is the *imago Dei*, both with regard to how God expresses Godself in the creation and re-creation of each individual, but also in the way that each human person

⁵⁵ For further discussion of the relationship between Rahner's theological anthropology and his theology of symbol, see Brent Little, "Anthropology and Art in the Theology of Karl Rahner," *Heythrop Journal* 52, no. 6 (November 2011): 939–44.

⁵⁶ Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 245–52.

realizes herself uniquely and concretely in the world. In humanity, the symbol of God is a subject who is capable of acting symbolically as a constitution of their own distinct being.

The Church as Symbol and Subject

Like humanity, Rahner understands the church as a symbol of the risen Christ that is also an active subject who manifests itself through its own symbolic action in the world: “the abiding presence of that primal sacramental word of definitive grace, which Christ is in the world, effecting what is uttered by uttering it in sign.”⁵⁷ Rahner’s subsequent theology of the church as it emerges in his essays on worship and the sacraments looks remarkably similar to the ecclesiology he develops in his essay on the symbol. In his book on the church and the sacraments, published shortly after his essay on the symbol, Rahner draws a direct link between the incarnation of Christ as the “historically real and actual presence of the eschatologically victorious mercy of God” and the church as “the contemporary presence, of that real, eschatologically triumphant and irrevocably established presence in the world, in Christ, of God’s salvific will.”⁵⁸ By extending the symbolic anthropology and ecclesiology from his previous essay, Rahner provides a basis for a familiar idea in liturgical theology: in the liturgy, the church truly utters itself into being. And in the instantiation of the church in history, in its assembly, its ministers, its institutions, and its liturgies, Christ, who uttered the church into being, is also concretely realized in it. The holiness of God is realized in the life and action of the church in the world. This includes the church’s liturgical activity, which makes present and explicit the revelation and the salvation of the triune God. And yet this symbolic continuity between Christ and Christ’s human and ecclesial symbols finds its limit when the church or humanity acts in ways contrary to the divine nature.

Symbolic Dissonance

If the holiness of the church’s presence in the world flows from its symbolic continuity with Christ, what then are we to make of the symbolic dissonance present in celebration of the Great Vigil described previously? The ecclesial failures in this liturgy reflect the way this specific community embodied and enacted the vigil liturgy, although as Sr. Thea reminds us, experiences of racism within the liturgy are not entirely unfamiliar to the rest of the church. But because these liturgical failures reflect the particularity of this

⁵⁷ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments* (Freiburg: Herder, 1963), 18.

⁵⁸ Rahner, *The Church and the Sacraments*, 14, 18.

community rather than the universality of the liturgical ordo, it is tempting to interpret liturgical failure as individual rather than ecclesial. The problem in the pews could easily have been the result of rushed or inexperienced liturgical planning—an unfortunate mishap and nothing more. We might fault the liturgical organizers for not fully considering how to integrate the two communities equally before the liturgy began. We could fault the English-speaking worshippers who showed at best only a half-hearted effort to share their space with others. We could criticize the clergy who did nothing to address the situation in word or action or the choir leaders who failed to fully integrate the music for the eucharistic celebration. We might conclude that the fault for these liturgical failures lies with individuals alone.

But given the long history of liturgically reinscribed racism in US Catholic churches, it would be a mistake to dismiss these elements as irrelevant accidents, as choices peripheral to the actual liturgical celebration, or as individual actions that are separate and distinct from the church's activity in the liturgy. Katie Grimes has chronicled the way historical practices of Christian initiation in the United States inscribed the culture of white supremacy on Black bodies, and Timothy Matovina has recorded the history of the displacement and suppression of Mexican clergy, traditions, and celebrations from Catholic parishes in the southwest United States that followed US expansion in the nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁵⁹ Both accounts clearly show how the church's action in and through its liturgical celebrations was indeed an act of racism, of oppression, of violence.

In light of this history, we need to avoid the temptation of seeing ecclesial failure as something that occurred only in the past. We should also be cautious of interpreting the failures of our present liturgies as inconsequential, as aberrations of the church's liturgical activity and therefore isolated actions of the church's sinful members who happen to be present during the liturgical celebration. Logics of ecclesial separation that distinguish between the church and its members, whether in essence or in act, may allow us to recognize the ways that liturgical failures distort the church and the liturgy, but they also foster a silent endurance that fails to acknowledge the ways that real people were harmed precisely by the church's failure *as church* in this liturgy, however mundane or understandable this failure may appear. Like Flannagan's examples of ecclesial failure in Paris and Rwanda,

⁵⁹ Katie Grimes, "Breaking the Body of Christ: The Sacraments of Initiation in a Habitat of White Supremacy," *Political Theology* 18, no. 1 (February 2017): 22-43; Timothy Matovina, "Latino Catholics in the Southwest," in *Roman Catholicism in the United States: A Thematic History*, ed. Margaret M. McGuinness and James T. Fisher (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019), 43-62.

historical examples like those that Grimes and Matovina offer are helpful because of the clarity with which they illustrate ecclesial failure within the liturgy. But the difference between their accounts and the one present here is one of degree, not of kind.⁶⁰ Indeed, it is in the familiar, ambiguous experience of the church in our everyday life where it is often most difficult to name the failures of the church as sinful. Examples like this Great Vigil celebration reveal ecclesial failures that are far less dramatic and therefore much easier to dismiss or ignore. It is not sufficient to recognize the church's failures only in the most extraordinary of cases. We must become more attuned to discerning and confessing the mundane ways that the church itself both resists and perpetuates these sins today.

In the United States, Catholic liturgies have failed repeatedly to interrupt the evil of racism in ways both great and mundane. Standing before the bishops, Sr. Thea described what this looked like for her community. This Easter Vigil offers another account of this ecclesial failure. Through its liturgical actions, the church has not been merely the site for racism, but also its agent. But the church's sinful actions also take place alongside liturgical acts that resist this evil and manifest the saving presence of God and God's holy church. The church is not merely the site of God's sanctification; it is also its agent. How then can we confess the church as holy in and in spite of its actions in the world? Again, Rahner's theology of symbol provides a helpful framework for interpretation that avoids a logic of ecclesial separation that would minimize or ignore these complex and even contradictory instantiations of the church in the world.

Plurality and Nonidentity

In situating the symbolic referent as a subject rather than a concept, Rahner points to the inherent plurality of symbolic reality. It is not sufficient to speak of a human subject as monolithic, as either a scholar or a Christian, because in fact a single person can be both at once and other things besides. A scholar may constitute herself not only in her admirable qualities, but also in more problematic ways, such as when she succumbs to confirmation bias, plagiarizes the work of another scholar, or is implicated in the abuse of students, colleagues, or research subjects. Scholars might make important contributions, even if their work is compromised in important ways. At the same time, acknowledgment only of a scholar's achievement without reference to their professional failure is not only incomplete but also inappropriate.⁶¹

⁶⁰ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 131-133.

⁶¹ This analogy reaches its limit when placed within a sacramental framework of *ex opere operato* in which the validity of the sacrament does not depend on the holiness of the

Rahner writes that, like the triune God, “each being bears within itself an intrinsic plurality” that, far from being destructive of the unity of the person, is in fact the person’s perfect fulfillment.⁶² The unity in these symbolic expressions comes not necessarily from any set of related characteristics or consistent qualities (like holiness or sinfulness) but rather from their shared referent, who itself is a living subject irreducible to any simple or homogenous essence. For Rahner, plurality is not a deficiency or a problem. Rather, individual subjects are more fully realized and recognized in the very multiplicity of symbolic utterances and activities in the world.

The very irreducibility of the symbol or subject to a single attribute—holy or sinful—provides a foundation for making sense of the multiple and often contradictory ways that the church expresses itself symbolically in both prayer and mission. During the Easter Vigil liturgy, the church uttered itself into being that night in both font and pew. Confessing this plurality is a way of more fully naming the church in its complexity as both a symbol of the triune God and a subject in its own right, which is recognizable not only by its continuity with God but also by its difference.

Key to the theology of symbol that Rahner lays out is this self-reflection the symbol evokes. The continuity of the symbol to the symbolized is held in tension with the quality of “otherness” the symbol possesses, the nonidentity of the symbol to the symbolized in which neither is reducible to the other. That is to say that symbols are not always self-evident in their utterance. They require discernment. The conviction that the lives of the Christian faithful make real and concrete the grace of God in history does not imply that everything these people do ought to be embraced as the manifestation of Christ’s saving grace in the world, nor does the insistence that the church is “indestructibly holy” preclude the possibility that it may be otherwise as well.⁶³ To hold closely to the continuity between subject and symbol without distinction is to suggest that the church or the Christian is like the divine in every way, holy and without sin. But Rahner contends that the symbol is defined as much by its nonidentity with its subject as by its

minister, but rather the holiness of God. In the case of the scholar, the cases mentioned here are often but not always enough to *disqualify* the validity of the scholarly work and therefore the manifestation of the scholar as scholar. And yet the limits of this analogy do not undermine the larger point here, which does not suggest that the sacraments celebrated in the liturgy are invalid. Instead, the principle of *ex opere operato* may well be extended here not just to the individual minister of the sacrament, but also to the church as a whole. The sacramental work that may be disqualified or invalidated by the sinful actions of the church is validated precisely by the holiness of God.

⁶² Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 235.

⁶³ Rahner, “The Theology of the Symbol,” 241.

continuity.⁶⁴ The confession that the church is a symbol of Christ is also a declaration that the church is not Christ.

Although Rahner initially acknowledges the otherness of the symbol as a way of resisting triumphalist theologies that too closely identify and thus confuse the symbol of the divine with the divine itself, his subsequent writings on the church tend to emphasize the continuity between the church and Christ rather than their distinction.⁶⁵ And yet it is this particular logic of separation between the church and the divine that is needed if we hope to avoid a theology that divides the church from itself and dismisses rather than engages the everyday experience of ecclesial failure. When the symbol is also a subjective actor, as is the case with both the church and the Christian, the very otherness of the symbolic subjects must mean that they may also manifest themselves in ways that contradict the divine, while still being fully expressive of themselves. That the presence of God is realized not only in but also in spite of the ways that individual Christians and the church have acted in history is at the very heart of a symbolic reality in which the subject realizes itself through the other.

In the celebration of this Great Vigil, the realization of the church redeemed and united stands side by side with the realization of church as sinner. We cannot simply count one liturgical act as a realization of the church and the other not: both are historically verifiable and authentic liturgical realizations of the church in the world. Failing to discern this distinction risks consecrating these sinful manifestations of the church as holy or rejecting the sacramental nature of the church entirely in favor of an ecclesiology that distinguishes between a holy God and a sinful church. If we allow 1) that the church is at once both symbol and subject, 2) subjects have an intrinsic plurality, and 3) symbols are at once both continuous with and distinct

⁶⁴ For Rahner, this nonidentity between symbol and symbolized is not necessarily a negative qualification, always and only expressed in the dialectic of sin and holiness between the divine and human or Christ and the church, but rather a consequence of subjective plurality. Nonidentity does not always refer to finiteness or failure. Rahner makes this very point in his discourse on the symbolic nature of the Trinity: "We know, on the contrary, from the mystery of the Trinity ... that there is a true and real—even though 'only' relative—distinction of 'persons' in the supreme simplicity of God, and hence a plurality, at least in this sense." This is not to deny the essential unity of God: "The original unity, which also forms the unity which unites the plural, maintains itself while resolving itself and 'dis-closing' itself into a plurality in order to find itself precisely there. For Rahner, the mystery of the Incarnation itself is essentially Trinitarian—that the divine discloses Godself precisely in that which is not God—humanity—while at the same time maintaining an essential unity with the divine. Rahner, "The Theology of the Symbol," 226–230, on 226.

⁶⁵ For further discussion, see Lennan, *The Ecclesiology of Karl Rahner*, 18–21, 24–28.

from their subject, we can begin to recognize both sin and sanctity in the ecclesial subject without resorting to logics of ecclesial separation.

In the church, God's holiness is realized in the world through ecclesial symbols that reveal God through their very subjectivity. As subjects, these symbols are imbued not only with the possibility of acting in and on the world but also with the freedom to do so. It is this freedom of symbolizing, this subjective sense of agency that is at once created and creator, that differentiates the ecclesial body from the divine, constitutes it as a plurality of being, and opens the possibility for activity both independent of and even in contradiction to the symbolized subject from which it proceeds. Thus, the affirmation that God is made present in and through the church's liturgical action should not be taken to imply that everything the church in liturgy does ought to be embraced uncritically as the symbolic manifestation of God's holiness or to suggest that which is not holy is not of the liturgy and therefore not of the church. The nonidentity of the church as a symbol of the divine necessarily allows for the possibility that the church may realize itself in ways that contradict its divine Creator. The inherent plurality of the church as subject, both holy and sinful, is not in fact a distortion or contraction of the true nature of the church, but rather evidence of it. That the holiness of the church is realized not only in but also in spite of the ways that the church acts in history is not contrary to the church's symbolic continuity, but rather the fulfillment of it.

But symbols require discernment, and the discernment of sin and holiness in the liturgy falls to the people of God. We should not hesitate to discern and name the tangible ways the church realizes itself as holy through its liturgical celebrations, as well as all the ways in which its liturgies contradict God's grace and reveal a church that is truly other than the holy God it worships. Flanagan argues that confessing the church's sins is an act of integrity in the midst of a generation that values authenticity, an act of fidelity to those who have been harmed by the church's presence in the world, and a proclamation of the good news of a God who is present in our midst in and in spite of the ways the church acts in the world.⁶⁶ That those who speak for the church, from the pope to the many faithful gathered at the altars of the Lord, have begun to make these proclamations, however imperfectly, is good news indeed. Although it is important to name and acknowledge the ways that the church failed in the major traumas and tragedies of human history, most people do not experience ecclesial failure in this way. Rather, they encounter ecclesial failure in the same places and activities in which they encounter ecclesial grace: in the everyday ways that we come together

⁶⁶ Flanagan, *Stumbling in Holiness*, 105–08.

and act as a church, including in our regular liturgical life. Learning to hold these together and to speak of them without separation is not only a faithful proclamation of the good news of salvation, it is also the only way that we can begin to overcome them. Standing before the US bishops, Sr. Thea Bowman ended her address with a plea for unity in the church. “Today we’re called to walk together in a new way toward that Land of Promise and to celebrate who we are and whose we aren’t. If we, as a Church, walk together—don’t let nobody separate you—that’s one thing Black folk can teach you—don’t let folks divide you up ... we know that if we do stay together—if we walk and talk and work and play and stand together in Jesus’ name—we’ll be who we say we are—truly Catholic and we shall overcome.”