

Insight Beyond Sight: Sacramentality, Gender and the Eucharist with reference to the Isenheim Altarpiece¹

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Since Vatican II, the Eucharist has become riven by different interpretations, and gender has become an elusive but persistent theme that haunts the margins of our liturgical coherence. My concerns in this paper are with the relationship of the desiring and suffering body to the sacramental encounter between word and flesh in the unfolding drama of the Mass, and with the extent to which gender functions as a lens through which to view the mystery of Christ in the incarnation and the Eucharist. My argument is that both feminist and neo-orthodox theology² exaggerate the significance of gender and sexuality, and in so doing they make the sacramental life of the Church hostage to ideological struggles. I suggest that a more poetic and fluid understanding of gender might enable us to go beyond what many see as the rationalisation of worship after Vatican II, through the rekindling of a sense of mystery which resists the nostalgic mystique that infects much contemporary theology, not least through the cultic sex and death fantasies of Hans Urs von Balthasar.

I have divided the paper into three parts, so that it is intended to form a reflective triptych on the Eucharist. In the first part, I consider some of the criticisms that have been made regarding the modern liturgy. In the second part, I contemplate the sacramental vision that informs Grünewald's Isenheim altar. In the third part, I

¹ When I presented this paper at the conference, I focused primarily on Grünewald's altarpiece. In this version I have considerably shortened the engagement with the painting in order to develop some of the theological arguments. However, I am still using broad brushstrokes to sketch complex theological questions. These are explored in greater detail in my book, *New Catholic Feminism: Theology and Theory* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), which informs parts 1 and 3 of this paper. To see the Isenheim Altar, the following website offers the best series of images: www.wga.hu/frames-e.html/g/grunewal/2isenhei/index.html I would also like to thank Gerard Loughlin for his insightful response to this paper at the CTA conference and some of his insights have been incorporated into this revised text.

² I use the term 'neo-orthodox' to refer to the highly symbolic and gendered theology, inspired by Hans Urs von Balthasar, which influenced the thought of Pope John Paul II and others who have sought a way beyond the reforms of the Second Vatican Council, to what they see as a more integrated and sacramental understanding of the mystery of the Church.

ask what we might learn from the genius of Grünewald, to assist us in our quest to reawaken a sense of sacramentality in the post-conciliar Church.

Part I – Mystery and Mystification

The Second Vatican Council resulted in a transformation at the sacramental level, ushering in a more rationalised approach to liturgy. Gone was the ancient idea of the Church as Holy Mother, a maternal body which nourished the faithful on the body and blood of Christ and united us into a living organism which pulsed with the life of faith. Henri de Lubac describes this maternal Church as bringing about a paradoxical return to the womb,

whereas, in the physical order, the child leaves the womb of his mother, and, withdrawing from her, becomes increasingly independent of her protective guardianship as he grows, becomes stronger and advances in years, the Church brings us forth to the new life she bears by receiving us into her womb, and the more our divine education progresses, the more we become intimately bound to her.³

Such imagery has informed Catholic ecclesiology from the beginning, although for many post-conciliar Catholics it may seem anachronistic and even infantile. We are adults now, we have ‘cast off childish things’ (1 Cor. 13.11), and we take our place in the modern Church as the pilgrim people of God, with the great opening lines of *Gaudium et Spes* ringing in our ears as we set out to transform the structures of politics and society.

But for some, this has been a disastrous process, not a maturing in faith but an abandonment of the mystical beauty of the Catholic tradition, in which the maternal femininity of our faith has been eclipsed by a more masculine and institutionalised Church. Von Balthasar argues that, since the Council, the Church has ‘to a large extent put off its mystical characteristics’ and has become ‘more than ever a male Church, if perhaps one should not say a sexless entity, in which woman may gain for herself a place to the extent that she is ready herself to become such an entity.’⁴ He asks,

What can one say of ‘political theology’ and of ‘critical Catholicism’? They are outlines for discussion for professors of theology and anti-repressive students, but scarcely for a congregation which still consists of children, women, old men, and the sick May the reason for the domination of such typically male and abstract notions be because of

³ Henri de Lubac, *The Motherhood of the Church*, trans. O.C.D.Sr Sergia England, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1982, p. 69.

⁴ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Elucidations*, trans. John Riches, London: SPCK, 1975, p. 70.

the abandonment of the deep femininity of the marian character of the Church?⁵

Von Balthasar's hyperbolic lament for the Marian Church is presented as a warning against women priests. One could ask, if women are cautioned against becoming part of the male hierarchy in this thoroughly functional Church, might there be space for women priests in a less hierarchical, less masculine Church? Might the presence of women within the priesthood constitute a challenge to this thorough-going masculinity of the post-conciliar Church, particularly if those women come bearing the values of relationality, nurture and 'feminine genius' that we are assured are the special prerogatives of women? I leave this question open but shall return briefly to it at the end.

Von Balthasar finds an unlikely ally in the American feminist Charlene Spretnak, who also criticizes the decline in Marian devotion among Catholic 'progressives' after the Council. In her book *Missing Mary* she describes the Catholic Church as 'a container and guardian of mysteries far greater than itself',⁶ and her description of the destructive influence of rationalising modernity resonates with that of von Balthasar,

When, forty years ago, the Roman Catholic Church deemphasized and banished an essential cluster of (Marian) spiritual mysteries, as well as the evocative expression of ritual and symbol that had grown around them, a profound loss ensued. Today, the theology and liturgy of the Catholic Church is less 'cluttered,' less mystical, and less comprehensive in its spiritual scope. Its tight, clear focus is far more 'rational' but far less whole. We who once partook of a vast spiritual banquet with boundaries beyond our ken are now allotted spare rations, culled by the blades of a 'rationalized' agenda more acceptable to the modern mindset.⁷

As von Balthasar and Spretnak suggest, the gendered aspects of the Church's sacramental life went into decline after the Council, and it is difficult to find any reference to the gendered dimensions of ecclesiology and priesthood in theologies written in the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁸ However, since then, both conservatives and feminists have focused attention on the problem of sexuality and gender in the Church's ethical and liturgical life, although from different ends of the theological spectrum.

⁵ *Ibid.* It is interesting that von Balthasar groups women with children, old men and the sick, over and against professors of theology: professors of theology include an abundance of old men and even a few women.

⁶ Charlene Spretnak, *Missing Mary: The Queen of Heaven and her Re-Emergence in the Modern Church*, New York and Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004, p. 3.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁸ Cf Elizabeth Johnson, 'Mary and Contemporary Christology: Rahner and Schillebeeckx' in *Église et Théologie* 15, 1984, pp. 152–182.

Much feminist theology is informed by a liberal theological agenda, in which the sacramental potency of the body is downplayed in favour of a vision focused on questions of ethics, sexuality and justice. Neo-orthodox theology, on the other hand, has championed what is sometimes referred to as ‘new Catholic feminism’,⁹ in which the sacramental significance of sexuality and gender are reaffirmed. However, this theological vision is heavily influenced by the sexual stereotypes and biological essentialisms of nineteenth century romanticism and science, and it has little in common with the poetics of gender found in pre-modern theology.

Gender used to be a potent analogy for the difference and intimacy which constitute the relationship among God, creation and the human soul. The female was analogous to creation and humankind, and the male was analogous to God. This was not without considerable cost to the female body which has always been rendered somewhat passive and inferior by this process in its ancient and modern variations, but the emphasis was on the gendering of language and symbols, not on the biological sex of the male or female body. Today the language of gender has become confused with the language of sex, and it has been invested with ontological significance primarily aimed at showing why a female body is incapable of representing a male Christ who in turn represents a masculine God – so that we are in a doctrinal *cul de sac* which culminates in the idolatrous divinization of the masculine.¹⁰ The following quotation from von Balthasar’s *Theo-drama* gives a sense of the gendering of human and divine relationships which informs this theology – he is a significant influence on new Catholic feminists,

The Word of God appears in the world as a man [*mann*], as the ‘Last Adam’. This cannot be a matter of indifference. But it is astonishing on two counts. For if the Logos proceeds eternally from the eternal Father, is he not at least quasi-feminine vis-à-vis the latter? And if he is the ‘Second Adam’, surely he is incomplete until God has formed the woman from his side? We can give a provisional answer to these two questions as follows: However the One who comes forth from the Father is designated, as a human being he must be a man if his mission is to represent the Origin, the Father, in the world. And just as, according to the second account of creation, Eve is fashioned from Adam (that is, he carried her within him, potentially), so the feminine,

⁹ This movement is a response to Pope John Paul II’s call for ‘a “new feminism”’ – see *Evangelium Vitae*, encyclical letter on the value and inviolability of human life, London: Catholic Truth Society, 1995, n.99. See Michelle Schumacher (ed.), *Women in Christ: Towards a New Feminism*, Grand Rapids MI and Cambridge UK: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004.

¹⁰ Cf Janet Martin Soskice, ‘Blood and Defilement’ in *ET: Journal of the European Society for Catholic Theology* (Tübingen, Heft 2, 1995), abridged in *Bulletin of Harvard Divinity School* (January 1995).

designed to complement the man Christ, must come forth from within him, as his 'fullness' (Eph 1.23).¹¹

In this scenario, Christ (and by association, the priest) is of necessity a biological male, because he represents God, who is 'the Origin, the Father', so that there is an implicit identification of the divine fatherhood with masculine sexuality and the male body. But Christ is also 'quasi-feminine' because he proceeds from the Father. Thus sexual difference is not about two forms of human embodiment – male and female – understood as co-equal but different in their capacity to image God. It is rather a metaphor by which the male has traditionally positioned himself as God in relation to woman, and as woman in relation to God. Thus the woman is not a sexual other at all but a being who exists only to make up a lack in the man, and therefore as an extension or projection of his sexual identity.

Alongside this problematic interpretation of sex and gender, there has in recent years been a quest to reclaim the sacrificial significance of the Mass which was also masked by the more liberalising interpretations which followed the Council. Perhaps the most lurid recent example of this comes from a document titled 'The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church', produced by the Synod of Bishops in 2004, which quotes St. John Chrysostom,

For when you see the Lord sacrificed, laid upon the altar, and the priest standing and praying over the victim, and all the worshippers empurpled with that precious blood, can you then think that you are still among men, and standing upon the earth? Are you not, on the contrary, straightway translated to heaven, and casting out every carnal thought from the soul, do you not, with disembodied spirit and pure reason, contemplate the things which are in heaven?¹²

I do not know how many priestly celebrants harbour these fantasies of bloody sacrifice inspired by what many would argue is a profoundly masculine desire to become 'disembodied spirit and pure reason'.¹³ However, I for one can only hope that the bishops do not here speak for the majority of priests.

This mystification of sex and sacrifice is symptomatic of a reactionary movement which seeks refuge from the Council's reforms in an appeal to anachronistic symbols and meanings that have little

¹¹ Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theo-drama III: The Dramatis Personae: the Person in Christ*, trans. Graham Harrison, San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1992, p. 283f.

¹² Synod of Bishops, XI Ordinary General Assembly, 'The Eucharist: Source and Summit of the Life and Mission of the Church', *Lineamenta*, 25 February 2004. Quoting John Chrysostom, *De Sacerdotio*, III, 4: *SCh* 272, 142–144. Website www.vatican.va/roman_curia/synod/documents/rc_synod_doc_20040528_lineamenta-xi-assembly_en.html#_ftnref41

¹³ Cf Grace Jantzen, *Becoming Divine: Towards a Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1998.

relevance for most modern Catholics. However, the neglected genius of Catholic sacramentality lies in its capacity to reach beyond our conscious, rational minds, into those visceral depths of desire and loss, intuition and silence, wherein a sense of communion and mystery is awakened through the sensual and rhythmic ritual of the liturgy. So, while this quest to reinvigorate the gendered and sacrificial aspects of the Mass might be misguided in its language and imagery, it offers an important insight into what has been lost in the transition to more rationalised forms of worship.

The psycholinguist Julia Kristeva describes the unconscious as the borderline between the body and language, suggesting a sacramentality of being which is revealed in that viscous, fluid state of consciousness where marrow, blood and bone meet adjective, noun and verb, and new meanings are birthed in ways that are not entirely under the control of our rational selves.¹⁴ The liturgical theologian David Power suggests something of this process when he describes rituals as,

disclosures of human vulnerability and incompleteness. Bodily rites, in their very intensity of rhythm, bring to the surface the modes of being in time and space, together with the tensions inherent to this condition of being human.¹⁵

Such explorations of the relationship between sacramentality, bodilyness and the unconscious have the capacity to reawaken the sacramental imagination by rooting our worship in the body's vulnerability, mortality and desire, without resorting to a paganised cult such as we risk in some of the more florid excesses of neo-orthodoxy. The idea that a hefty injection of symbolic sex and sacrifice into our sacramental life will shore up our Catholic tradition is both misguided and untraditional. Tradition is more open-ended and diverse than its current defenders would have us believe, and our celebration of the Mass offers many doorways through which we might enter as bodily spirits into that anticipation of heaven which we experience in our worship.

In order for this to happen, we need to rediscover the eschatological dimension of the liturgy. The Mass is an epiphany of heaven and a temporal realization of eternity within the community of Christ. It is through this healing communion that we open ourselves to the transformation of our very being that allows us to discover what it means to live in communion beyond the liturgy itself, so that our

¹⁴ Cf Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror – An Essay on Abjection*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1982, and *Tales of Love*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez, New York: Columbia University Press, 1987.

¹⁵ David N. Power OMI, 'The Language of Sacramental Memorial: Rupture, Excess and Abundance', in L. Boeve and L. Leussen (eds), *Sacramental Presence in a Postmodern Context*, Leuven, Paris, Sterling VA: Leuven University Press, 2001, p. 144.

whole lives become suffused with sacramental significance in ways which profoundly challenge the political and moral values of our world. In other words, contrary to much liberal and liberationist theology – including much feminist theology – I am suggesting that the liturgy is the source, not the expression, of our ethical life. When we seek to impose the rhetoric of politics and morality on the Mass, we use it for ideological purposes rather than as an expression of our self-abandonment to God. But conversely, when the liturgy is used by the hierarchy to police and regulate the Church, then we may find ourselves struggling against feelings of frustration, impotence and exclusion which block our capacity to worship. Such is the experience of many of in the Church today – women, gays, and divorced and remarried Catholics, for example.

According to the Vatican II ‘Constitution on Sacred Liturgy’, ‘In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the Holy City of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims’.¹⁶ Michael Kunzler, in his study of liturgy, refers to ‘The many-faceted idea . . . of the unity of the earthly and heavenly liturgy’.¹⁷ This means that,

If the liturgy celebrated on earth is a communication between God and the creature, then it is always a participation in the eternal feast of the heavenly liturgy in the fullness of the life of the triune God into which the heavenly Church of the angels and saints has already found an entry.¹⁸

This idea of the heavenly liturgy brings me to Grünewald’s altarpiece. In an era when postmodernity means the ‘end of the book’,¹⁹ when global communications and the entertainment industry have created a culture of illusory immediacy and ephemeral encounters which make everyday life a carnival or a parody of the mundane, how can the liturgy compete? How can we offer a vision of heaven to a culture glutted on every kind of spectacle and special effect? How can we rediscover ourselves in that time out of time between heaven and earth, time and eternity, when some of us already spend several hours a day in the virtual reality of the worldwide web?

It would be anachronistic to point to Grünewald’s masterpiece as an answer to these questions. Nevertheless, in this artist’s vision we

¹⁶ ‘The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum concilium*’ in *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery OP, Leominster, Fowler Wright Books, 1975, p. 5.

¹⁷ Michael Kunzler, *The Church’s Liturgy*, trans. Henry O’Shea OSB, Placed Murray OSB, Cilian Ó Sé OSB, Amateca: Handbooks of Catholic Theology, London and New York: Continuum, 2001, p. 19.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Ghakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), p. 86.

glimpse what we have lost. In such great liturgical art, we might yet rediscover the neglected mystery of the Eucharist, in that dazzling darkness through which the absence of God shimmers around us as the real presence of Christ in time out of time and insight beyond sight.

Part II – The Isenheim Altar: Insight beyond Sight

Martin Buber's Jewish existentialist reflection on the Isenheim altar is titled 'The Altar'. In a study of Buber's essay, Jean Luc Nancy makes the point that 'Altarpiece is a technical term, while "altar" immediately designates the place and operation of a celebration, a cult of worship and an offering.'²⁰ I shall retain the use of that word because I want to explore the capacity of the altar to animate the narrative that is symbolically enacted in the liturgy. The altar was painted for the hospital chapel of Saint Anthony's Monastery at Isenheim in Alsace and it is now on display in its dismantled state in the Musée d'Unterlinden in Colmar. André Hayum, in his book *God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision*, compares this to 'the change in status that the zoo as an institution imposes on natural creatures'.²¹ Significantly, the work was executed around 1515, only two years before Luther may or may not have nailed his ninety-five theses to the door of Wittenberg Cathedral, sparking off the Reformation. Hayum refers to 'the poignant project at Isenheim of affirming a harmonious Catholic world view at the brink of a period of spiritual crisis'.²² He interprets the altar in terms of the two sacraments of the Eucharist and Baptism, but here I focus on its eucharistic significance.

The most famous and dramatic aspect of the altar is the crucifixion, which appears in its closed position. Here, we are confronted by a Gothic work of startling and unique genius. The bodies surge out of the darkened landscape, translating the scriptural text in the crook of the Baptist's arm into a vivid sense of corporeality. Referring to the crucified Christ, Arthur Burkhard writes, 'There is no trace of transfiguration, no stoic resignation, no heroic struggle, no serene superiority'.²³ Neither is there any suggestion of St. John Chrysostom's glorious sacrifice, with the bloodied victim on the altar transporting us by 'pure reason' to a disembodied heaven. If this is the *kenosis* of

²⁰ Martin Buber, 'The Altar' and Jean-Luc Nancy, 'Chromatic Atheology', *Journal of Visual Culture*, 4 (1), April 2005, pp. 166–128, p.123.

²¹ André Hayum, *God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989, p. 8.

²² *Ibid.*, p. 89.

²³ Arthur Burkhard, *Matthias Grünewald: Personality and Accomplishment*, Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1936, p. 28.

God in Christ, then it seems close to Sarah Coakley's interpretation, based on Philippians 2.5–11, which portrays Christ as 'choosing *never to have* certain (false and worldly) forms of power – forms sometimes wrongly construed as "divine"'.²⁴ Grünewald's dead Christ invites a Girardian interpretation in which it is not God who is being emptied, but our conceptualization of God in terms of sacrificial violence and retribution. The redemptive power of God is seen, not in the tortured corpse of the crucified, but in the sacramentality of his surroundings which interpret the meaning of the cross.

Karl Barth had a copy of this painting above his desk, and he refers in the *Church Dogmatics* to the pointing finger of John the Baptist. Barth writes,

This is the place of Christology. It faces the mystery. It does not stand within the mystery. It can and must adore with Mary and point with the Baptist. It cannot and must not do more than this. But it can and must do this.²⁵

But this reading is reductive, not least because it confuses Christology (a task of intellectual reasoning), with worship (an act of participatory communion). This suggests that it is limited by a Protestant perspective in which the bodily drama of the Mass is overwritten by a more logocentric understanding of salvation.

The altar does not portray the worshipper as standing outside and pointing to the mystery. Rather, it draws us into the mystery, uniting word and flesh in the body of Christ, where the suffering body praying before the altar is taken up and becomes one with the suffering body on the cross. Reflecting on the altar after his conversion to Catholicism, the author J.K. Huysmans writes,

that awful Christ who hung dying over the altar of the Isenheim hospital would seem to have been made in the image of the ergotics who prayed to him; they must surely have found consolation in the thought that this God they invoked had suffered the same torments as themselves, and had become flesh in a form as repulsive as their own; and they must have felt less forsaken, less contemptible.²⁶

To illustrate this point, we might look at the most human of the demons in the *The Temptation of Saint Anthony* wing. Hayum suggests that the figure signifies, not demonic malevolence but 'deformity

²⁴ Sarah Coakley, 'Kenosis and Subversion: On the Repression of "Vulnerability" in Christian Feminist Writing' in *Powers and Submissions: Spirituality, Philosophy and Gender*, Oxford: Blackwell, 2002, p. 11.

²⁵ Karl Barth, 'The Problem of Christology' in *Church Dogmatics* I/2, trans. G.W. Bromiley and T.F. Torrance (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1970), p. 125.

²⁶ J.-K. Huysmans, *Grünewald, The Paintings, Complete Edition* with two essays by J.-K. Huysmans and a Catalogue by E. Ruhmer, London: The Phaidon Press, 1958, p. 36.

and pathos'.²⁷ On the scrap of paper in the bottom corner are St. Anthony's words to Christ from the *Legenda Aurea*: 'Ubi eras ihesu boni, ubi eras? Quare non affuisti ut sanares vulnera mea?' (Where were you, good Jesus, where were you? Why were you not there to heal my wounds?) Christ's body bears the same afflictions as the demonic figure, so that he is the response to that anguished question. The cloth which covers the scripture that the demon is clutching has become the loincloth around the body of Christ, symbolizing the suffering flesh which the Word takes on.

This union of the suffering Christ with the tormented human flesh is enacted within the maternal body of the Church, and this is another theme which Barth's Protestant reading fails to appreciate. For Barth, the Baptist points to Christ, and Mary prays passively on the far side of the mystery. But Mary's catatonic pose is part of the mystery, uniting her with the dead Christ while subtly evoking the Catholic belief that the Church, the New Eve, is taken from the side of Christ, the New Adam, on the cross. Thus the Baptist's gesture directs our gaze not only to Christ but to his mother and, as Hayum suggests, her posture and the positioning of her body above the empty tomb on the predella invite comparison with birth as well as with death. The beloved disciple is looking not at the cross but at Mary. He witnesses the suffering of Calvary in her, representing all those for whom the crucifixion is made present in the sacramental offering of the Church. Her white robe – signifying here not virginal purity so much as the bleaching of death – contrasts with the vibrant colours of Mary Magdalene. Buber sees Grünewald's use of colour as didactic, so that these two figures are a pictorial metaphor for the human condition – the Virgin Mary in a state of primal whiteness awaits the vitality that is signified by the colours surrounding the risen Christ in the *Resurrection* wing, while the vivid figure of the Magdalene represents the manifold and fragmented meanings of our humanity which will be harmonised in the radiance of the resurrection. Buber writes, 'Before the night of the world they shine forth at the feet of the crucified one in different and yet related attitudes: as the question of Man'.²⁸ Burkhard writes of 'Magdalene, near, small, human, disturbed; Mary, distant, heroic, tragic, and contained'.²⁹

These interpretations suggest that all humanity is represented by the women at the foot of the cross. Like those before and after him, including von Balthasar, Grünewald draws on the metaphorical representation of humanity as woman to convey this meaning, but the figures in the altar resist sexual stereotyping. Mary Magdalene is not here a symbol of fallen female sexuality so much as an expression

²⁷ Hayum, *God's Medicine*, p. 30.

²⁸ Buber, 'The Altar', p. 117.

²⁹ Burkhard, *Matthias Grünewald*, p. 29.

of our human condition in all its passionate extravagances of desire and grief, while one searches in vain for any sign of assertive masculinity – human or divine – in this altar. Rather, this scenario of compassionate suffering – the suffering of Christ with the tormented victim of sin and disease, and the suffering of the women with Christ – draws us into a darkness that already shimmers with the waters of baptismal rebirth, and invites us into a heaven that pulsates with the maternal life of the Church.

The altar communicates the reconciling power of the cross which divides and unites the scene along the vertical plane. The crucified Christ mediates between the human, historical images of suffering on the left, and the eschatological symbols of scripture and Eucharist on the right, a meaning emphasised by the disruption of chronology in the presence of the Baptist. Our gaze is drawn in a continuous circular movement uniting these two aspects. The colour white links the loincloth around Christ to the scripture in John's hand, the lamb at his feet, and the mother in the disciple's arms, and the whiteness of her robe is most perfectly reflected in the eucharistic lamb. The central mystery of the cross is, as Barth suggests, 'an ultimate mystery' which 'can be contemplated, acknowledged, worshipped and confessed as such, but it cannot be solved, or transformed into a non-mystery'.³⁰ But Barth fails to acknowledge that we become part of this mystery in the space which opens up between the maternal body of the Church, personified in Mary, and the Eucharist, symbolized by the lamb and the chalice. In unveiling the cross which occupies the space between them, the artist makes visually present the invisible mystery of the eucharistic offering – Christ's body, given for us.

Hayum suggests that 'the entire closed stage urged active participation in the body of Christ toward an imaginative re-creation of life.'³¹ It is this 'imaginative re-creation of life' that is revealed in glorious Renaissance light and colour when the altarpiece is fully opened. Grünewald's *Incarnation* combines the nativity and the eschaton, using a dense interweaving of symbols. Heaven is embodied within the familiar trappings of domesticity and folklore,³² which in turn become refulgent with mystery through the play of light, the angelic choirs, and the heavenly presence of God.

Georg Scheja describes this scene as,

the *theologia gloriae*, the idea that the Incarnation – which means the clothing of the Divine with flesh – also has as consequence a

³⁰ Barth, 'The Problem of Christology', p. 124f.

³¹ Hayum, *God's Medicine*, p. 40.

³² For a study of anti-Judaic messages in this scene, Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Devil at Isenheim: Reflections of Popular Belief in Grünewald's Altarpiece*, Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1988.

transfiguration of the human and corporeal. This is attained in a twofold manner: from God into Christ, from the essence of mankind into Mary. It is for this reason that both are shown in glory.³³

In this *theologia gloriae* we see the harmonious transformation of all the discordant scenes of suffering and loss that we encounter in other aspects of the altar. The plump-faced peasant girl of the *Annunciation* has journeyed through the death of Calvary to the realization of her own role in the incarnation. Radiant with the same aura that surrounds her Son in the resurrection, Mary as *ecclesia* and Queen of Heaven gazes out from the darkness on the left, so that as the personification of the Church she witnesses to her own divine motherhood. But her coronation also invites us to see her as the redemption of Eve. There is a pictorial narrative which connects the desolate female figure in the predella of the *Lamentation*, by way of the Magdalene at the foot of the cross, to the beatific vision of the woman in glory. The symbols that connect them are the cross, which in the crucifixion scene extends through the base of the painting into the *Lamentation* below, and the tree of life which has its roots in that place of desolation and abandonment – still visible when the altar is fully open – and flowers in the *Incarnation* tableau in the space between the female figure on the left, and the maternal figure on the right. Mary here is ‘Eve’s Advocate’ – a title used by both Irenaeus and Cardinal Newman – and Eve/Mary gazes in wonder at the glory of her own salvific grace as the Mother of God.

The infant Christ in his mother’s arms still bears the shape of that tormented demon – their posture is the same – but now his newborn flesh signifies the promise of healing and rebirth to the suffering victim. Catholic art shows us, four hundred years before Freud, the psychological form of our longings for wholeness and peace – the infant reconciled to the maternal body symbolizes both a memory and a hope of paradise. Marilyn Robinson, in her novel *Housekeeping*, writes that,

memory pulls us forward, so prophecy is only brilliant memory – there will be a garden where all of us as one child will sleep in our mother Eve, hooped in her ribs and staved by her spine.³⁴

It is this prophetic memory that Grünewald shows us in his scene of heaven.

Again, Barth’s interpretation is reductive, since his emphasis on the solitude of Christ and his focus on the Father-Son relationship prevents him from recognizing the intimacy of the maternal relationship

³³ Georg Scheja, *The Isenheim Altarpiece*, trans. Robert Erich Wolf, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1969, p. 46.

³⁴ Marilyn Robinson, *Housekeeping*, London: Faber and Faber, 2005, first published 1980, p. 192.

that is intrinsic to the Catholic understanding of incarnation and redemption. Barth writes,

Over there, but quite lonely, the child Jesus lies in His mother's arms, surrounded with unmistakable signs reminding us that He is a child of earth like all the rest. Only the little child, not the mother, sees what is to be seen, there, the Father. He alone, the Father, sees right into the eyes of this child. On the same side as the first Mary appears the Church, facing at a distance.³⁵

Feminists would argue that this emphasis on the solitude of Christ and on the Father-Son relationship betrays an androcentric and patriarchal mindset. However, many feminist theologians, shaped perhaps by the Protestant legacy of the Anglo-American academy, are also blind to the centrality of maternal symbolism to Catholic Christianity. Usually dismissive of Mary as a symbol of repressed sexuality and female subordination, too often feminists fail to recognize the maternal potency of Catholic Christianity, which is ripe for rediscovery and reconsideration from a feminist perspective.³⁶

Grünewald's altar draws us into a liturgical celebration that is both sacrifice and rebirth, Eucharist and Baptism, enfolding the whole meaning of the story of salvation within its panels, unfolding these gradually in the feasts and seasons of the liturgical year. It offers us 'joined up' liturgical thinking, not in terms of a rationally coherent explanation, but in terms of an artistic truthfulness which draws us in – suffering bodies, sinful bodies, human all too human bodies. It shows us that, through our eucharistic participation Christ suffers and is reborn in us and with us, so that we are redeemed in him and with him beneath the compassionate and loving gaze of our father God and within the consoling and loving embrace of our mother the Church.

This interpretation sees the Isenheim altar as a great meditation on the sacraments. On the very eve of the Reformation, Grünewald show us Baptism and Eucharist as dynamic performances enacted within the textures and seasons of earthly life, inviting us to cultivate a graced vision capable of penetrating the veils of temporality and mortality to recognize the divine life that glistens among us. To quote Hayum, Grünewald,

searches out and taps these two pre-eminent sacraments of the Catholic church for their ultimate mysterious powers of transport and transformation. . . . The dense structure of communication that comprises the Isenheim Altarpiece modulates between the institutional realm of

³⁵ Barth, 'The Problem of Christology', p. 125.

³⁶ See Tina Beattie, 'Redeeming Mary: The Potential of Marian Symbolism for Feminist Philosophy of Religion' in Pamela Sue Anderson and Beverley Clack (eds), *Feminist Philosophy of Religion: Critical Readings*, London and New York: Routledge, 2004.

religion and that of private space and time of ritual and the existential imperatives of suffering and bliss, of birth and death. Thus it stimulates our own surviving impulses toward the sacred sphere; we as modern viewers still sense those charismatic sources and mythic roots of its visual expression.³⁷

The Paradox and Playfulness of Becoming Redeemed

The Isenheim Altar was created on the cusp of a religious revolution, and today we too inhabit an era of crisis and transformation in the Christian faith. Grünewald was able to draw on a shared understanding of visual symbols that would soon disappear as the biblical text displaced the sacramental imagination, and the Reformation in turn segued into the Enlightenment with its emphasis on science and reason. Perhaps always a little too late, in Vatican II the Catholic Church arrived at modernity just as it began its intellectual and cultural decline. Our post-modern culture, like Grünewald's, is receptive to the dynamism of visual communication. However, unlike Grunewald, we cannot rely on our audience to interpret the symbols of Catholic Christianity, and we therefore have to find creative ways to draw bodies into the sacramental encounter with Christ through the doorway of human suffering and desire, into the maternal body of a Church lit up from within by the promise of heaven.

Power suggests that postmodernity offers an opportunity to rediscover the sacramental potency of gesture and the spoken word over the written text. He argues that this invites a kenotic theology in which the story of Christ is constantly interrupted and broken up through a new plurality of meanings, so that the written text itself is emptied and renewed through the spoken word, and tradition once again becomes a living and dynamic performance,

to the *saying*, the signifying, as process, rather than letting the tradition be constituted by the *said* or the signified Such excess is impossible without emptying. To be open to the unsaid, the word has to be emptied of the said Whenever the written is taken up into a process of oral expression and intersubjective exchange, it is in a sense emptied through a process of hermeneutic and recovery that is allied to the lives of those who *are speaking, saying*.³⁸

Carl Raschke also invites us to go beyond the nihilism of postmodernity to an awareness of its possibilities, by rediscovering the value of performativity and the carnivalesque. Raschke writes,

a theological thinker privy to the aesthetics and the poetics of the post-modern can begin to envision 'sacrality' not simply as a complex of

³⁷ Hayum, *God's Medicine*, p. 117.

³⁸ Power, 'The Language of Sacramental Memorial', p. 149f.

stock theological emblems or representations, but as a veritable marquee flashing with the evanescent tokens and hints of religious sentimentality in the twentieth century . . . Sexuality and popular religion, for instance . . . cannot be disentangled from each other because of their very ‘carnivality’ (in [Umberto] Eco’s sense), or ‘in-carnality’ from a broader semiotic perspective.³⁹

The reference to ‘a veritable marquee’ could as well be describing Grünewald’s *Incarnation* as postmodern culture. Echoing this sense of the carnivalesque dimension of liturgy, Godfried Cardinal Danneels suggests that we need to rediscover a sense of playfulness in our worship. He argues that ‘A liturgy which is almost exclusively oriented to the intellect is . . . not likely to involve the human body in the celebration to any great extent.’⁴⁰ He goes on to describe liturgy as ‘a global, symbolic activity which belongs to the order of the “playful”’. The uniqueness of “play” is the fact that one “plays in order to play”, one plays for the sake of playing.’⁴¹

I am arguing that our capacity for liturgical ‘playfulness’ might be discovered through a renewed appreciation of the maternal ecclesiology that was lost at the Council, informed by a lavish sense of sacramentality. But if this is to become more than an exercise in cultic nostalgia, then it requires an exploration of the place of the female body in the sacramental life of the Church. As I mentioned earlier, those who argue for a revival of the Church’s maternal, Marian dimension often do so as a form of opposition to women priests, but similar questions are now appearing in the work of feminist thinkers such as Spretnak and indeed my own work, whose arguments would lead to a different conclusion.

The message of the Isenheim altar requires the presence of both male and female bodies, although not in a way that emphasises sexuality *per se* – the emphasis is on the capacity of gendered bodies to communicate a sense of desire and suffering, maternity and incarnation, in an inclusive vision of the promise of salvation. In Grünewald’s time it was culturally acceptable for men to play both male and female roles, whether in the theatre or in the drama of the liturgy. After all, less than a century later, Shakespeare’s tragedies, romances and comedies with their refulgent sexuality would be performed by all-male casts, in a culture which was capable of the imaginative leaps that this required to make it credible. Today, however, this is as culturally inappropriate in the Mass as it would be in the theatre,

³⁹ Carl Raschke, ‘Fire and Roses, or the Problem of Postmodern Religious Thinking’ in Philippa Berry and Andrew Wernick (eds), *Shadow of Spirit: Postmodernism and Religion*, London and New York: Routledge, 1992, p. 104f.

⁴⁰ Godfried Cardinal Danneels, ‘Liturgy Forty Years after the Second Vatican Council: High Point or Recession’ in Keith Pecklers SJ (ed), *Liturgy in a Postmodern World*, London and New York: Continuum, 2003, p. 17.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

and the result is not only the alienation of an increasing number of women worshippers, it is also an impoverishment of the sacramental imagination.

The French psycholinguist Luce Irigaray argues, in agreement with some anthropologists of religion, that religious symbols and practices are gendered. Men's rituals tend to focus on sacrifice, and women's rituals on fertility. If that is true, then the Isenheim altar perfectly reflects the reconciling genius of the Catholic tradition, which emerges from a synthesis between the pagan and the Hebrew that we have yet to fully acknowledge. Grünewald offers us neither a pagan cult of sex and death such as that which shadows the work of von Balthasar, nor a religion of texts and morals such as Protestantism, and such as post-conciliar Catholicism risks becoming. Instead, he shows us how sacrifice and fecundity lie at the very heart of the Catholic sacramental imagination, displacing the violent and lustful gods of patriarchy by a God who identifies with us fully in the suffering and death of Christ, in order to welcome us into a maternal heaven. If we want to know who the Christian God is, we must enter through the gateway of baptism into the womb of the Church, where we are eucharistically nurtured on the body and blood of Christ. Through these sacramental encounters, we experience not only the sacrifice and suffering of Christ's self-giving on Calvary, but also the fecundity and compassion of his maternal love. This is a vision which potentially challenges neo-orthodoxy by insisting upon the sacramental significance of the female body, but which also challenges liberal feminists in their neglect of sacramentality and catholicity in favour of an unfocused ecumenism. Nancy Dallavalle refers to the tendency among feminist theologians to seek 'a reformulation of Christian tradition in the light of the emancipation of women, a position that continues to rest on an ethical, not a theological, basis.'⁴² She argues that,

Catholicity... cannot be simply about justice. Rather it is primarily about sacramentality. Indeed, orthodoxy's call to the right worship of God involves not only the understanding that faith seeks but also a considered setting-aside of the norms of humanity for the grace of basking in the mystery of what human norms can never measure.⁴³

Like Spretnak and the liturgists whose work I referred to above, Dallavalle represents an emergent voice in the post-conciliar Church, drawing together the insights of feminism, sacramental theology and postmodernism, in the quest for a revitalized liturgy in which the insights of Vatican II are incorporated into a richer and more abundant sacramental life.

⁴² Nancy A. Dallavalle, 'Towards a Theology that is Catholic and Feminist: Some Basic Issues', *Modern Theology*, Vol 14.4, October 1998, pp. 535–553, p. 540.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 548.

Grünewald's altar shows us how to abandon ourselves to a cosmic mystery in which the Mass plays freely within us and around us as we ourselves play at being the heavenly creatures we are becoming. In the liturgy, reasoned argument and moral prescriptiveness dissolve in a sense of awe and wonder at the infinite mystery of the God who comes to us as Mary's child and Calvary's crucified, as bread and wine and mother's milk. Nurtured in darkness at the foot of cross, with the radiance of heaven before us, we go out from the Mass into the world as a pilgrim people, ready to meet our vocation to share 'the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted.'⁴⁴

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⁴⁴ Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, in Austin Flannery OP (ed), *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*, Dublin: Dominican Publications; New Town NSW: E.J.Dwyer Pty. Ltd., 1992, 903–1001, n.1, p. 903.