SACRAMENTALITY AND CULTURE

• **Giorgio Buccellati** •

"The old adage *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* can be boldly rephrased as *Extra Ecclesiam nullum ens*, which we can in turn paraphrase as 'outside the Church there is no presence.'"

1. Introduction

The terms used in the title describe two poles which are to be understood in relationship to each other. From a purely historical point of view, sacramentality may be considered an extremely singular phenomenon of human culture. Conversely, from a theological point of view, the cultural dimension may help us to elucidate some aspects of what sacramentality means as a religious experience.

It is necessary to dismiss, at the outset, two cultural dimensions to which sacramentality is related, but with which it is not to be confused: sacralization and semiotics. Sacralization is an event through which a given religious institution places a certain aspect of its cultural makeup outside and beyond the human sphere; as a result, what is "sacralized" is perceived to be in direct contact with the divine. For example, in ancient Mesopotamia the building of a temple or the fashioning of a cultic drum were events governed by specific rituals through which the two cultural constructs (temple and drum) were "sacralized." There is no reason to doubt the fundamental good faith, the intellectual integrity, and even the spiritual validity of this

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sacralizing event. Of course, the persons who were responsible for it may have been amply encrusted, at any given time, with professional bigotry, but this can be true of anyone who becomes a mere practitioner of even the most spiritual of sacral events. In principle, however, the resulting sacrality of the temple or the drum was real and genuinely felt within the framework of the Mesopotamian apprehension of the divine. The sacraments, too, perform a similar function, in that they set apart, consecrate, "sacralize" persons and things.

Semiotics is a complex system of signs, whereby any given element can be marked by a strong signature that gives it a dynamic quality, capable of eliciting a stronger response than the element by itself ever could. Thus the simple ingredients of some Mesopotamian rituals, for instance, are signs to be understood within a larger system, as with the layers of an onion that are slowly peeled off, and are meant to evoke, and to effect, a progressive sense of release from the encrustation of one's sins. Thus also, in a modern non-religious setting, the placebos that have a therapeutic effect on the patient; or the colors red and green on a street light which affect us by now at the level of our instincts (in other words, they are more than mere conventional codes). The sacraments, too, are endowed with a semiotic valence: the water of Baptism cleanses and purifies, the absolution after confession effects a psychological relief.

From a purely cultural point of view, then, it is possible to say that sacramentality is sacralization—and yet it is more than that; that it is semiotics—and yet it is more than that as well. It is this degree of difference that I propose to examine in this article: a distinctiveness that makes sacramentality a culturally verifiable *unicum*, a most singular dimension of human culture. In the process, I will touch on some central aspects of contemporary thought, in particular deconstruction and postmodernism, suggesting ways in which their fundamental presuppositions are, unexpectedly, addressed by sacramentality as a cultural experience.[1]

2. Tradition

[1]I am most grateful to Fr. Paul Mankowski, S. J., for a number of comments and suggestions that have helped me immensely in the final revision of this article.

a. The wager of archaeology

Sacramentality is, by definition, rooted in corporeality: matter is of the essence, transformed though it may be. This of course is a cultural fact. But it remains, as such, at the level of sacralization and semiotics. Beyond that, however, we can point to a cultural dimension of the Christian experience of the sacraments that differs, in ways that are historically demonstrable, from any other cultural tradition—a cultural experience that is fully human, yet wholly unique. And the uniqueness lies in this: that, for sacramentality, as for no other cultural experience, there can be no archaeology.

I define archaeology as the study of broken traditions.[2] As such, it attributes meaning to patterns that emerge from correlations among disjointed fragments that are excavated from the ground without the benefit, or the correlative burden, of a living tradition concomitant with that of the excavator. Once meaning is attributed to such a broken tradition (or "dead" tradition, as it is sometimes called, since no living carriers are extant), the experience which lay behind the fragments can be appropriated and reinserted into ours. This is how culture becomes experience. The brokenness is healed, as we reembed a past culture into our own, not only through the inspection of patterns, but through the assimilation of values (which had given rise to the patterns in the

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[2]There is a complex technical background to this definition which I must ignore in this context, and for which I would like to refer to my forthcoming book *A Grammar of the Archaeological Record*. Let me only mention that I am speaking very specifically of archaeology as a discipline, based on field work with its techniques and methods of analysis: the study of broken traditions is the hermeneutical equivalent of field techniques that analyze the stratigraphy of cultural deposition. I do not speak of archaeology as a modality of thought in the way articulated by Michel Foucault, particularly in *Les mots et les choses*. *Une archéologie des sciences humaines* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); *L'archéologie du savoir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969). In most ways, his notion of archaeology is diametrically opposed to mine (or, for that matter, to that adopted by any practicing archaeologist): his is like the study of a cultural matrix or substratum that lies in the historical subsoil and may not even cross the liminality of articulate self-awareness (the metaphors of soil and threshold recur often in his works, but precisely as metaphors, not as components of the physical stratigraphy with which the discipline of archaeology deals). In this respect, "archaeology" for Foucault means rather antecedents, prehistory, *archaiologia* in the sense of Thucydides. Also, his emphasis on discontinuity bears no relationship to my concept of a broken tradition, but rather describes a nonlinear sedimentation, a cavernous resonance.

first place). Akin to the decipherment of a mute script, the decipherment of a dead culture is the proper and ultimate achievement of the archaeologist: just as we can read a language that was once spoken, so we can make ours an experience that was once lived.

It is by definition that sacramental reality could never be so deciphered. Were the Church to vanish from history, future archaeologists could of course identify expressions of belief, objects of cult, spaces of ritual action; given sufficient evidence, they could reenact, say, the Mass. But given truly sufficient evidence, they would realize the ultimate failure of such a process or, conversely, of the initial claim. For the perceived value of sacramental reality is not in the reenactment, not even in the adherence to the credal presupposition behind the reenactment, but only in the reality of the unbroken continuity of tradition. Christianity can only be handed down, never reinvented.[3] If broken, its basic claim is lost forever. Could Christianity ever be recovered "archaeologically" (which is in fact the Protestant claim), then it would never have existed in the first place. This is a daring proposition: either Christianity will last forever, or it never existed. Lulled as we are by 2000 years of continuous growth and consolidation, the risk as outlined may seem academic—and yet it is daunting, when seen against the backdrop of hundreds of thousands of years of human development.

I propose, then, that we see in this very special claim to continuity, in this intrinsic imperviousness to archaeological reenactment, an aspect of the cultural uniqueness of Christian sacramentality. Our tradition is a "deposit" (*paratheke*), something set aside for safekeeping, like a contract[4] or a covenant (*diatheke*), which requires continued referentiality to the contracting parties, short of which it

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[3]This is true of the sacramental aspect in particular, since ideas and behavior could indeed be appropriated from a broken tradition. But such a non-sacramental Christianity based merely on ideas and behavior would not be the living tradition which only qualifies as Christianity proper within the life of the Church. The only exception is Baptism, which can be administered by anyone who intends to act in Christ's name. But such intention entails the existence of the Church (if not an actual belonging to it—even a non-Christian may administer a valid baptism), hence the existence of an unbroken, living sacramentality.

[4]See the interesting philological documentation for this understanding of the word *paratheke* provided by Ceslas Spicq, *Theological Lexicon of the New Testament* (Peabody, Mass., 1994), vol. 3, 24–27.

becomes a mere philological document from the legal one it once was. In other words, a contract remains a contract only as long as there are parties bound by it and as long as the contractual object is still extant; otherwise, it survives merely as a "literary" text.

To illustrate the significance of this understanding of the "deposit" as a contract, let me refer to a concrete example. During my excavations at the ancient city of Terqa in Syria, I came across a private archive of cuneiform tablets written in Akkadian and dating to about 1720 B.C. The archive was found in the house of the man whose name, Puzurum, appeared on all the contracts. So we had the original contracts, the walls of the house, and the fields outside the city, all owned by the same man. The contracts had no doubt been valid in their own time. But now that all referentiality was lost, they were no longer valid, i.e., they could no longer serve to confer any property title. The Christian "deposit" is analogous to such a contract in form. But were it to become a mere archaeological relic, like the ones now found in the ground, a more far-reaching consequence would ensue: whereas the cuneiform property contract was valid while its referentiality lasted, the Christian deposit would be nullified even for its earlier stages. Puzurum's contracts were certainly valid at the time when they were written, even though they are no longer valid today. But the *diatheke* would lose even its original claim to validity should it come to be, at any point in time, broken. Even its quality as an intellectual construct would be lost, because that, too, is predicated on the reality of the claimed duration of the pertinent interpersonal relationships. It might appear at first that the purely intellectual dimension of Christian doctrine (e.g., the very nature of monotheism) might be recoverable were the tradition broken—but it is not properly so, as we shall see later.

In this respect, the "deposit" is more than a tradition. One can, for instance, speak of a manuscript "tradition" that hands down a certain code which, to be alive, has simply to be read and thus be brought back to life. Such tradition can be halted and restarted, as long as we can reinterpret the code—as is the case when, having found a lost score of Mozart, we can play anew his music. By contrast, our "deposit" cannot be forgotten and then picked up again; it is not a mere code, however lofty. Nor is it a mere symbol of continuity, as a flag in a relay race: the goal is the "deposit" itself, it is not the finishing line where victory is achieved and the flag dropped. Such inner life of the concrete sacramental world is Christian culture proper—a culture

in which the ascended Jesus takes part in a personal way. Such inner life can only be experienced through faith, but the historical coherence of the sacramental "deposit" is an external, real, cultural phenomenon open to normal cultural investigation.

It is true, of course, that there are in all human cultures many examples of esoteric traditions that are not to be revealed except to the initiated, and that would also, accordingly, be impervious to archaeological analysis. But this is due simply to the lack of documentation, not to structural incompatibility, as I have argued in the case of sacramentality. More importantly, there are two major distinctive traits which apply uniquely to Christian sacramentality. First, there is nothing esoteric about the Christian message. In fact, it is a remarkable fact that Christians retain a profound sense of wonder and mystery even after so much has been made explicit through credal statements and theological discriminations. While protective of interiority as the locus where the spiritual is found, Christianity does not equate mystery with secrets. It is rather, and precisely, part of its genius that it can broadcast the mystery. Accordingly, the sacramental system would easily be recaptured, in both its formal expression and intended meaning. But the very fact of having been broken would make its reality irreparably irretrievable.

The second major difference from properly esoteric systems of belief and religious practice is the claim that such unbrokenness rests on the corporeal continuity of a human individual beyond his real death. The strong Old Testament belief that divine charisma is not the exclusive private reserve of the individual, but rather invests and permeates cultural institutions as well—a belief that was disregarded by the Protestant Reformation in its opposition to the institutional and sacramental Church—such belief, then, reached its climax in the Christian claim that the Church is the sacramental embodiment of Jesus.

b. The "house of Peter"

As long as it lasts (and it is the Christian claim that its end will coincide with the end of time), the sacramental tradition remains, incontrovertibly, a de facto cultural whole (a "monument" of Foucault's archaeology, as well as a "document" in terms of the history of ideas). The guarantor of unbrokenness is the sacrament of Order; and

with it, the continuity of Peter's succession.[5] Such continuity is as concrete and documentable a cultural fact as any; but, unlike any other, it is unique in its holding together of the temporal, personal, and institutional spheres. For, as far as I can see, no other cultural institution is so intrinsically linked, by definition, to the concreteness of unbroken, personal involvement—the laying of the hands, which extends a physical touching through time back to a single source. In this sense, sacramental reality becomes a cultural "monument" and "document" like no other in history.[6]

It is significant, in this connection, to reflect on the exegetical basis for this claim. In a recent article, Pannenberg restates the classical Lutheran argument regarding the nature of the "Petrine ministry."[7]

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[5]It is interesting to remember the intellectual itinerary of a short story by Graham Greene, which provided the title for his last collection of short stories: *The Last Word and Other Stories* (New York: Viking, 1990). Through persecution, thus goes the plot, all Christians have been killed except the pope, whose solitary life is meant to serve as a warning against any other would-be Christian. In the end, he is killed personally by the tyrant: except that, at the moment the pope expires, the doubt that his faith may have had merit creeps into the tyrant's mind: "and a new Christian was born." These are the words Greene used not in the published version, but in an account he gave earlier in a public speech (published in Philip Stratford, *The Portable Graham Greene* [New York: Viking, 1977], 585–594, under the title *The Last Pope*), when he spoke of the novel as something he had an intention of writing but could not bring to an end. The dramatic tension of the story is heightened by the consideration that it was based on what had been related to Greene as a factual event, namely, the preparations Pius XII allegedly made in case he were to be taken prisoner by Hitler (see Leopoldo Duran, *Graham Greene* [San Francisco: Harper, 1994], 242f, a reference I owe to my son, Federico). A possible reason why the story had not at first come to fruition is that the plot, for all its dramatic power, is, in effect, objectively impossible from a truly Christian point of view! The intellectual dimension of doubt is indeed constitutive of faith, but becoming a Christian outside of sacramental continuity is impossible. The perceived difficulty in completing the story, as communicated by Greene in his earlier speech, is in line with the deep sense of suffered sacramentality so pervasive in Greene's work, notably in *The Power and the Glory* (1940), which proclaims so eloquently the irrepressible inner momentum of the sacrament of Order.

[6]In contrast, see the curious claim by Moltmann that the doctrine of the primacy of Peter would actually exclude the primacy of the Resurrection! See Jürgen Moltmann, *Trinität und Reich Gottes: zur Gotteslehre* (Munich, 1980), 218f.

[7]Wolfhart Pannenberg, "A Lutheran's Reflections on the Petrine Ministry of the Bishop of Rome," *Communio* 25, no. 4 (Winter 1998).

Thus he says that one should discard an "obsolete" exegetical understanding of Peter's confession (in Mt 16:15–20 | Mk 8:29–30 | Lk 9:20–21), according to which one would attribute to Jesus' response (only in Mt 16:17–19) an intention that goes beyond the person of Peter. In other words, Jesus would have had in mind Peter alone, not his successors. It is in the nature of any declaration of obsoleteness to become in turn obsolete, and here I would like to claim just such obsoleteness for the Lutheran position, on substantial exegetical grounds.

Pannenberg argues for a mere personal authority (for which he uses the Latin term *auctoritas*) that would have been attributed to Peter by Jesus, and so recognized by Peter's later contemporaries. It is wrong, he says, to go beyond that and claim as well for Peter and his successors an institutional supremacy of power and jurisdiction (*potestas*). The proper biblical perspective from which to look at Peter's confession episode rests, I submit, on quite a different pair of terms than *auctoritas* and *potestas*, namely, on the interrelated biblical concepts of *berît*, "covenant," on the one hand and, on the other, *zera'*, "seed," or *bêt*, "house." In this light, we will look briefly at three important correlations between the posture attributed to Yahweh in the Old, and to Jesus in the New Testament.

First, the nature of the promise. The terms "covenant" and "seed"/"house" are closely intertwined in the assurances to Abraham (Gn 15:18 and 17:2; in the latter, reference is made to "number" rather than "seed") and to David (2 Sm 7:12). Neither promise is limited to the life tenure of the individual. As in the case of the ancient Near Eastern political treaties between an overlord and a vassal, it is rather an *institutional* bond that binds the overlord and his institution with the vassal and his institution. As I mentioned earlier, the Old Testament charisma is emphatically institutional, not just personal. The solemnity of Jesus' pronouncement to Peter is very much in line with this exegetical tradition: he, Jesus, is the overlord, he speaks to Peter as Yahweh had spoken to Abraham and to David; he binds himself not just to the mere person of Peter, but to the "Church" (*ekklesia*, presumably *qahal* in Hebrew).[8] What Peter said was not from "flesh

[8]In the light of the solemnity of the occasion, and of the resonance of Old Testament themes, the expression "*my* church" in the reported words of Jesus seems to me to exclude the notion that what was meant was a minor, domestic grouping, in the way in which "church" came also to refer to particular, local

and blood": analogously, the "seed" (*zera'*) and the house (*bêt*) of Peter will not be a physical progeny, but a spiritual descendance; his kingdom will not be of this world, but spiritual, and yet fully in line with the multitude that sprang from Abraham, or the dynasty that issued from David.

A second link with the Old Testament may be found in the case of David, who undergoes a dramatic change of status: from shepherd to king. The image that is stressed is that he will henceforth herd his people like a shepherd of men (2 Sm 7:7–8). Jesus, on the shores of the lake, transforms the image: Peter and Andrew will be fishers of men instead of just fishers in the lake (Mt 4:19 | Mk 1:17; cf. Lk 5:10).

A third, and most important, exegetical consideration pertains to the change of name from Simon (*Shim'ôn*) to "rock" (*Kephas*, in Aramaic).[9] In this regard, too, Jesus evokes Yahweh. The change of name from Abram to Abraham is explicitly linked with the covenant and the multitude that will issue from Abraham (Gn 17:5). The change of name from Jacob to Israel is explicitly linked with the prevailing over enemies (Gn 32:29), the converse of which is declared by Jesus ("the gates of hell will not overpower it [i.e., the Church]:" Mt 16:18). The change of name from Simon to Kephas (Mt 16:18; Jn 1:42) confirms that Jesus is reenacting, solemnly, Yahweh's posture in the Old Testament. No other such occasion is recorded, and in some ways it brings to mind the significance attributed to the naming of John the

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churches. On the solemn, if slightly veiled, echoing of Yahweh on the part of Jesus, see the insightful remarks by Jacob Neusner, *A Rabbi Talks With Jesus. An Intermillennial Interfaith Exchange* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), especially 66–74, where the point is made that Jesus' attitude toward the Sabbath, rather than being imputed to mere laxity, should be seen as a "monumental claim": Jesus claims to be himself the only source of rest, the true Sabbath, thereby assuming a role that had been strictly reserved to Yahweh.

[9]A very interesting early rabbinic text underscores the Abrahamic dimension of Simon's call: "The Holy One, blessed be He, desired to create the world, but sitting and meditating upon the generations of Enoch and the Flood, He said: 'How shall I create the world, seeing that those wicked men will only provoke Me?' But as soon as God perceived that there would rise an Abraham, He said: 'Behold, I have found a *petra* upon which to build and to lay foundations of the world.' Therefore he called Abraham Rock, as it is said, 'Look to the rock from which you were hewn' [Is 51:1–2]" (Samuel Lachs, *A Rabbinic Commentary on the New Testament. The Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke* [Hoboken, N. J.: KTAV Publishing House, 1987], 256).

Baptist and of Jesus himself: their name was programmatic for their personal destiny, but beyond that for the impact that their life would have had on humanity.

It is awesome to evoke, on the basis of these exegetical strands, what can be perceived as Jesus' own awareness of his acting as a counterpart of Yahweh, and, in turn, the apostles' awareness of Jesus' intent. To summarize the pertinent elements:

1. Yahweh had changed the name of Abram and promised him a multitude of descendants—and Jesus changes the name of Simon and promises to build his Church on him (Kephas' descendants being as independent of flesh and blood as Simon's declaration of faith had been);

2. Yahweh had proclaimed a covenant with the renamed Abraham and his descendants—and Jesus links inextricably his kingdom with the renamed Kephas;

3. Yahweh had changed the name of Jacob and promised him that he would prevail over men—and Jesus promises Kephas that the powers of death will not prevail over him;

4. Yahweh had promised David a house as part of his new covenant with him—and Jesus places Kephas in control of a kingdom;

5. Yahweh had called David to be a shepherd of men—and Jesus calls Simon (and Andrew) to be fishers of men.

It is also significant to note that Kephas' name underwent one further change, to *Petrus*, clearly not at the initiative of Jesus. That Kephas should have been so "translated" (to *Petrus*) indicates that the semiotic valence of the name ("rock," in whatever language) was alive beyond the purely onomastic dimension (*kephas* in Aramaic). Jesus had called Simon "the rock," and once "the rock" settled in Rome the proper rendering of Jesus' renaming (*Kephas*) was to be transferred to Latin *Petrus* (the same word occurs in Greek as well). What mattered was not so much the link with Rome as Peter's seat, but the fact that the name was envisaged as having a far-reaching universality, in time as well as space. (Note the analogy with the term "Christ" translating "Messiah.") Peter is the rock who holds the keys of the institution. It is ironic that even in a Protestant perspective the term used should be "Petrus-amt" rather than "Kephas-amt": by accepting the notion of a "Petrine" (rather than "Kephaic") ministry it seems as though the universality of the institution is recognized and unwittingly affirmed by the Protestant position.

It is, I believe, an inescapable conclusion, profoundly consonant with the biblical sense, hence with biblical exegesis, that one should read Jesus' intention as that of the overlord who, like Yahweh in the Old Testament setting, establishes an institutional charisma founded not on abstract legislation, but on personal bonding. The *auctoritas* and *potestas*, if any, are to be understood in terms of the biblical categories of *berît* and *bêt*: the *covenant* between Jesus and his Church is sealed in Peter and his *house*, a house which depends not on flesh and blood, but on the spiritual bond with the Father. The *bêt Kephas*, newly understood as the "house of *Peter*," is the papacy.

3. The fractured universe

a. The challenge of deconstruction

We may now consider the impact of sacramentality on an intellectual construct in which contemporary thought takes special delight—deconstruction. In so doing, I seek to shed light on deconstruction itself, on the one hand, and, on the other, on certain basic elements of Christian thought and experience. Here is my argument in a nutshell. There are two irreducible views of reality, one which rests on the belief that the absolute is wholly beyond relativization, and the other which believes instead that the absolute is the sum total of all that is relative (and which by so doing relativizes, as it were, the absolute). The former is the monotheistic view, the latter the polytheistic. Deconstruction may be viewed as a modern restatement of the polytheistic view: it claims fragmentation as the new ontology (even though it would abhor the term). The absolute is deconstructed into component fragments; hence it is, properly speaking, relativized. The monotheistic view, as it may be articulated within the Christian perspective, does in fact recognize the validity of the premise: the universe is indeed fractured. But the fracture does not explain the core of being: rather, it is seen as having been introduced by sin, and thus as a denial, not a relativization, of the absolute. Recognizing the personal wholeness of the absolute, we also recognize that, beyond the fracture, we meet his determined will to heal the rift of sin, a healing that is inextricably linked to sacramentality. Thus, the fractured universe is the same starting point for both views: but whereas the

fracture is central to deconstruction, the reconstructed wholeness is central to Christianity.

This understanding of deconstruction is not directly attributable to authors who represent that point of view;[10] it rather reflects my interpretive reading of what I take to be their basic presuppositions. I am proposing it, in other words, as an alternative description of what I perceive to be the core of their line of thinking. If we can speak, then, of a Christian deconstruction, this is not an adaptation of received doctrine to contemporary modes of thought, but rather a rethinking of original and well-established Christian insights that are shown to meet the challenges now voiced by deconstruction. It would in fact appear that such a Christian reading is truer to deconstructionist goals than deconstruction itself. Facing the deconstructionist argument, Christian thought clarifies a fundamental point, namely, that divine particularity, in its interaction with human particularity, does not relativize the absolute. Herein lies the best answer to the constant risk for deconstruction to become an exercise in construction: just as love cannot be constructed, yet is permanent, so a relationship with the absolute can be viewed as permanent yet dynamic.

All this has a direct bearing on a proper understanding of atheism and its relationship to theism. David Schindler has eloquently made the case for a coincidence of the two, atheism and theism, in American culture.[11] Such a seeming contrast is, in fact, at the very root of polytheism: the absolute is conceived as the sum of all that is relative, hence it presumes a divine sphere, but one which is not

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[10]Some recent books on this topic which I have found particularly useful are: Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991) (original French edition: 1982); Catherine H. Zuckert, *Postmodern Platos* (Chicago and London, 1996); John D. Caputo, *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida. Religion Without Religion* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1997); Jean-Luc Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger and Phenomenology* (Chicago, 1998); Hugo A. Meynell, *Postmodernism and the New Enlightenment* (Washington, 1999); Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism. History, Theory and Fiction* (New York and London: Routledge, 1999) (1st ed., 1988).

[11]David L. Schindler, "Faith and the Logic of Intelligence: Secularization and the Academy," in *Catholicism and Secularization in America*, ed. David L. Schindler (Notre Dame: Communio Books, 1990), 170–193; id., *Heart of the World, Center of the Church. 'Communio' Ecclesiology, Liberalism, and Liberation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1996), 189–202; id., "Modernity, Postmodernity, and the Problem of Atheism," *Communio* 24, no. 3 (Fall 1997): 563–579. See also Marion, *God Without Being*, 57: "Theism and atheism bear equally upon an idol."

properly absolute. The absolute is splintered, hence relativized: it is there (theism), yet it does not exist (atheism).[12] The term "atheism" has an invidious quality to it: it implies recognition and denial at the same time. As such, it pretends to avoid the burden of proof, for it seeks to argue that one need not prove there is no god as long as one has not proven there is one. With a quasi-legal mentality, one tends to think that one is "in-nocent" ("a-theist") until proven guilty. By facing things as they are, i.e., by recognizing that atheists are in fact properly polytheists, the burden of proof lies as much on their as on Christian shoulders. How does a polytheist "prove" that the absolute itself is fractured? Descriptively, at best. That is to say, mythologically. A myth is a statement of understanding, a narrative that presupposes understanding and builds a plot to explain it, never claiming factuality. (On the other side, revelation is a statement of fact that may well defy understanding but claims total factuality.) Thus the Mesopotamian cosmogonic myth *Enûma elîsh* is a statement of understanding: it narrates a plot (the progressive growth of a divine) to encase an argument (the origin of the universe as we know it). It is properly an intellectual paradigm that describes the progressive internal differentiation of an amorphous initial mass.

b. The Crucifixion as the universal rift

Let me begin my exposition with a consideration of the notion, and the experience, of sin. If it is a unique characteristic of monotheism to recognize the essential discontinuity between the infinite and the finite, it is also its prerogative to recognize the reality of sin as the choice of the finite pole within that discontinuity, to the exclusion of the infinite. Through sin we identify so completely with the finite as to deny the infinite, instead of identifying with an infinite who posits

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[12]See my article "On Christic Polytheism and Christian Monotheism," *Communio* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 113–138. A significant development of the substance of the same theme (however different in formulation, particularly with regard to the notion of polytheism) can be found in the enlightening book by Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence. A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, D.C., 1994), 51–53; 136; id., *The God of Faith and Reason. Foundations of Christian Theology* (Washington, D.C., 1995) (1st ed., 1982), especially chapters three and four.

the finite. And in so doing, we opt for a demotion in our ontic[13] status, effectively advancing the claim that the finite mode of being is the only real one, and that we have full control over it.[14] Once the option has been exercised, it pervades the full dimension of being: it achieves in part its claim by turning the polarity into a singularity that can no longer reestablish a polar link to infinity. It vitiates at the origin the relationship between the two poles: it is truly an original sin which severs a link by denying that there is anything worth the linking in the first place. Hence the Christian doctrine of sin and of redemption is at the same time profoundly ontic and profoundly personal. On one level, it deconstructs ontological reality by acknowledging an essential polarity; on the other level, it deconstructs discourse by pointing to personal involvement, rather than logical recognition, as the only mechanism that can redeem, i.e., truly reconstruct, reality. Let us review briefly how this is so.

As I have just mentioned, sin, properly understood, is not disharmony; or rather, it is disharmony only by default. Primarily, it is a personal rejection of God.[15] As a consequence, sin is an ontic

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[13]It is useful to distinguish carefully between "ontic/ontic order" as referring to the realm of being and "ontologic(al)/ontology" as referring to the realm of discourse, analogously to what is the case with such pairs as "anthropic/anthropological," but also "divine/theological," and "historical/historiographic." See the interesting remarks by Marion, *God Without Being*, 66 and 69.

[14]The ontological dimension of sin has been dramatically emphasized by Karl Barth, see especially *Church Dogmatics*, vol. 3, no. 2, 135f.

[15]The opposite view—one that considers the possibility of a "philosophical sin," i.e., a sin that goes against divine law but does not constitute an offense to God—was rejected explicitly, see, e.g., Denzinger 2291 [Alexander VIII, Decr. 24, Aug. 1690]. A proper understanding of this fundamental characteristic of biblical "ethics" can best be appreciated within a thoroughgoing contrastive analysis of the religious experiences of ancient Israel vs. Near Eastern polytheism. Sin as such is not properly conceivable within a polytheistic system. While in polytheism there is indeed the recognition of disruption of a continuous order, and there are words that we translate as "sin," there is in fact no recognition of a personal offense against the infinite personal reality of a god who has established such order in the first place; see my articles "Ethics and Piety in the Ancient Near East," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Scribner, 1995), vol. 3, 1685–1696; "On Christic Polytheism and Christian Monotheism," *Communio* 22, no. 1 (Spring 1995): 113–138; "Mesopotamian Divination as a Mythology of Fate," in *The Persistence of Religions. Essays in Honor of Kees W. Bolle*, ed. Sarah J. Denning-Bolle and Edwin Gerow, vol. 9: *Other Realities* (Malibu: Undena Publications, 1996), 185–196. I speak of

demotion, because the ontic order revolves around the personal reality of God, and sin is a direct spiting of, a personal offense toward, God who is the foundation of the ontic order. As in the primordial sin described in Genesis, the intentional opposition to God,[16] more than any attendant modality, constitutes the essence of sin. Of course, sin is not an abstract rejection, hence it will always become embodied in a particular modality at a particular point in time. But in each case it is a betrayal of God's acceptance of, or even trust in, our freedom. The fundamental consequence of such a person-centered view of ethics is as follows: the supreme attempted diminution of God is his removal; and the supreme occasion ever afforded us humans to do so was to remove Jesus from existence. Sin is like a death wish, the wish to see God dead, so that I may prosper instead, and this has come true in the most concrete way in the Crucifixion. For, if we wish to annul the polarity, what better way than by actually killing the personal embodiment of that polarity? By wishing myself to be my own fate, I refuse to accept Jesus as my fate, and wish him dead instead. If not as an instrumental cause, then as an efficient cause I also stand accused, with the "Israelite men" addressed by Peter (Acts 3:12), of having "killed the author of life" (*ton arkhegon tes zoes*, 3:15). Jesus "freely accepted" to be killed not only for me but by me: "No greater love than placing [thus literally, from *títhemi*] one's life for his friends . . ." (Jn 15:13)—in the friends' own hands! We are the wicked tenants, who kill the son of the landlord in the belief that we may capture for ourselves what is his (Mt 21:38 | Mk 12:8 | Lk 20:14). We are the sinners who neglect the Son of man each time we neglect the least of his brothers (Mt 25:45). We are the "sinful humans" into whose hands Jesus was given to be crucified (Lk 24:7). Along with Jesus, the Father and the Spirit accept the same response, they accept my wish to "lay hands" on God in any way I can reach him—specifically, as it were, wounding the

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monotheism *tout court* because I do not believe there is any other kind of monotheism but the one rooted in the tradition of ancient Israel. This and related themes are discussed at length in a forthcoming monograph I have provisionally entitled *The Religion of Ancient Mesopotamia in Its Structural Contrast with the Religion of Ancient Israel*. See also note 19, below. A parallel line of thought, which is very fruitful but which I cannot develop here, derives from the work by Levinas, who emphasizes the contrast between totality and "alterity."

[16]See Jacques Servais, "Confession as a Sacrament of the Father of Mercy According to Adrienne von Speyr," *Communio* 26, no. 2 (Summer 1999): 349.

Trinity by killing Jesus. The ultimate consequence of this acceptance is the actual *heremosis* of Jesus on the Cross, his "devastation" or "alienation,"[17] articulated in his consciousness ("My God, why have you forsaken me") and concluded at the moment of his actual death.

We may say that it was the first sinner's wish to see Jesus dead, as it is mine each time I sin—not because we physically lend our hands to the Crucifixion, but because excluding the infinite inevitably entails excluding the infinite as incarnationally present in Jesus. Hence it follows that through my personal sin I am responsible for the passion and death of Jesus. But if I am, so was the first sinner who ever sinned. In other words, the Crucifixion is the ultimate offense and the ultimate sin, mine as much as that of the first, the original sinner. To this extent we may say that, by its very essence, the original sin, simply inasmuch as it is the first in a chronological sequence of sins, already entails the Crucifixion. Our shared responsibility in the death of Jesus can be

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[17]I think that a case can be made for an interpretation of the "abomination of desolation" (*bdelugma tes heremoseos*, Mt 24:15, Mk 13:14; on the other hand, Lk 21:20 considers *heremosis* a generic event, more explicitly linked with a military episode) as an anticipation by Jesus of the horror of the Crucifixion—not so much the horror of the pain, as the horror of the deicide. No one better than Jesus ever understood what this really meant. If so, this *heremosis* could be considered as the original locus, in Jesus' own words, of the *kenosis* of the hymn in Phil 2:7. This would seem to be a fruitful line of research, which I believe can be supported by both exegetical and theological arguments, not to be developed here. *Inter alia*, it would put a special light on the notion of *kenosis*, which, in the supreme moment of the Crucifixion, is seen (in Philippians) as the acceptance of something abominable and in fact sinful. Of what else but the Crucifixion can one say that it is "an affliction (*thlipsis*, as in Col 1:24) such as there never was since the beginning of creation until now, nor will there be again" (Mk 13:19, Mt 24:21)? That is also what would have happened during the generation to which Jesus was speaking (Mt 24:34, Mk 13:30, Lk 21:32). Somewhat pointing in this direction are some passages by Balthasar, especially where he speaks of the "collision" (*The Glory of the Lord: A Theological Aesthetics*, vol. 7: *Theology: The New Covenant* [San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1989], esp. 208–281), or of the isolation of Jesus on the Mount of Olives (*Mysterium Paschale, The Mystery of Easter* [Grand Rapids, Mich., Eerdmans, 1990], 100f; see also, for a description of the Crucifixion that may be interpreted along the lines proposed here, 101f: "the entry of the sin of the world into the personal existence, body and soul, of the representative Substitute and Mediator. . . . [T]he hypostatic union constitutes the condition of possibility of a real assumption of *universal guilt*" (italics mine); 112–115: "the theology of Jesus' condemnation by mankind in its entirety"; 118: "[I]n the *ecce homo* . . . is the only valid and obligatory image of what the sin of the world is like for the heart of God, made visible in 'the' man."

expressed by saying that through our sin we both (the first sinner and I), we all, agree to the Crucifixion ("he was handed over through (*dià*) our iniquities": Rom 4:25).

It may seem exaggerated to speak of an ontic impact of sin. For on the face of it there seems to be no actual diminution of our being for all of our sinning. And how can we speak with the theological language of sin within the philosophical realm of ontology? How can a non-Christian follow such a line of reasoning? As to the first point, redemption does in fact hold the ontic order in balance; in other words, redemption is not a religious event divorced from the natural order, but rather invests reality in its totality. And sacramentality is the actual vehicle through which this "investing" takes place. As to the second point, the central "philosophical" point of the Christian argument is that the ontic order is personal, and cannot be understood without reference to such a personal dimension—a position that is elicited by the yearning of deconstruction (see below, 4a). From such premises follows the consideration about the ontic impact not only of redemption as an event, but also of sacramentality as the means through which the effect of the event is communicated.

This line of thought about the common identification of all in a sin that is at the origin of all sins is pregnant with a number of questions, which seem encapsulated in the words at the end of the night prayer at Gethsemane: "Behold, the Son-of-man is handed over into the hands of the sinners."[18] Further reflection[19] would show how it is not an allegoric hyperbole to think of myself as one of these

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[18]Mt 26:45, Mk 14:41; similarly, in the words of the angels after the Resurrection, Lk 24:7. The word for sinners, *hamartoloi*, is only used in a generic sense, so that it cannot serve as a disparaging term to refer to the soldiers who captured Jesus.

[19]A full development of these themes requires an altogether different approach, one that investigates the very nature of ancient Near Eastern thought within which biblical categories were shaped as cultural phenomena. Here only a glimpse of such a line of argument can be given (see also above, note 15). The quest of origins in Greek thought aims to define universal logical principles, whereas in Ancient Near Eastern thought it aims to identify a substantive point of beginning—a point which is endowed, however, with greater significance than befits a mere accidental moment. It is an "event" that bears ontological significance. One might speak, trying to define in Greek terms a non-Greek perception, of "onto-history." In this light, the event of Jesus is the onto-historical summit. History converges on Jesus and radiates from him.

sinners into whose hands Jesus was betrayed;[20] how the Crucifixion qua deicide is a historical moment in which all historical sins do in fact converge; how the notion of all humans contributing to the Crucifixion is not a pious image, but both a historical and an ontological reality; how Jesus' acceptance of death results in the defeat of the supreme intention behind every sin, the wish for the death of God; how the doctrine of the Immaculate Conception can be viewed as proclaiming that, of all humans, only Mary, who gave life to Jesus, did not contribute in even the smallest way to giving him death, as every other human did, and does.

c. The ultimate risk of a failed redemption

An important dimension of the biblical perception of sin is the active involvement of a non-human partner, the devil. On the premises here stated, and on the further premise that the devil is indeed a historical agent with a basic understanding of the ontology just described,[21] we may consider the following: the temptations of Jesus[22] must have served an even more "demonic" aim than one might

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[20]See for example the beautiful prayer of Paul VI: "Ora la vittima è immolata sull'altare: ascoltiamo il suo lamento, fatto preghiera *per noi*, *i crocifissori*: 'perdona loro: non sanno quello che fanno [now the victim is immolated on the altar: hear his lament, prayed *for us*, *those who crucified him*: "forgive them, they know not what they do],'" *La Via della Croce*, Stazione XI (M. C. Moro, P. Macchi, and G. Basadonna, *Preghiamo con Paolo VI; Dialoghi e invocazioni a Dio* (Milan: Paoline, 1998), 124 (italics mine). The First Eucharistic Prayer for Reconciliation from the Canon of the Mass echoes the same feeling: "Jesus, your Son, innocent and without sin, gave himself *into our hands* and was nailed to the Cross," and so do the moving words of the Negro Spiritual, "Were *you there* . . . ."

[21]One is reminded of the episode in Dante's *Inferno* where "un d'i neri cherubini" (one the black cherubs, i.e., a devil) develops a theological argument to show that a certain soul (Guido da Montefeltro) belongs by right to him and thus cannot be saved; as he brings the soul to hell, he tells the angel: "Forse tu non pensavi ch'io loico fossi!" [Perhaps you did not think that I could be a master of logic!] (*Inferno* 27:113, 122f). In a similar vein, one will also think of C. S. Lewis' *The Screwtape Letters* (1942).

[22]The significance of the temptations is underscored by the fact that this is the only episode in the Gospels for which no witness other than Jesus can be quoted. This means that—if we assume the episode's historicity, as I do—it must have mattered greatly to Jesus, to the point that he would have related it to his disciples. It is also interesting to remember the central importance attributed to the relationship between the tempter and Jesus in Milton's *Paradise Regained*. It

otherwise assume. Looking at the episode of the temptations in a fully historical vein, we must presume that the devil might in principle have had a chance to succeed. Short of reading the temptations as a literary game aimed at proposing simply the invincibility of Jesus as a mythical hero, we must consider that the devil was realistically trying to induce a very human, very historical Jesus to yield. Obviously, the temptations were aimed at testing Jesus, but not simply for the sake of curiosity (to discover whether Jesus could fall), nor as the result of the devil's "natural" need to influence and corrupt human will. In a demonic perspective, the stakes were even higher. For, had Jesus consented, the great fracture I have described would have become permanent and irreversible, and redemption would have been preempted. A sin of Jesus would have resulted in the catastrophe of an unredeemable universe, of a *permanent* universal rift that would have rent asunder the very core of reality forever. And this would have resulted in a very different "fullness of time." For Jesus would then have died the death of sin, and we, alongside the devil, would indeed have killed him more thoroughly than on the Cross.

But Jesus did not yield. Hence it was that death on the Cross remained, in the perspective of the "enemy," the next best thing, and the Cross must indeed have seemed a full success to a devil gloating over the abyss of Holy Saturday. We may thus picture the devil witnessing the Crucifixion with expectations similar to those he held during the temptations. Not having been able to induce Jesus to sin, the devil was now succeeding, it seemed, to undo, with our willing participation, his physical existence. The abyss of Holy Saturday, so perceptively and tragically borne out by Speyr and Balthasar, seemed further to confirm the devil's expectations. The splitting of the Temple's veil (Mt 27:51 | Mk 15:38 | Lk 23:45) almost emerges as the symbol of the new world order, the permanently fractured universe. But the devil's incipient gloating was belied by the Resurrection. Had Jesus yielded to temptation, there could have been no equivalent of

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should be noted that I am not taking up here the question of "impeccability" as such (I will only refer to an interesting old article by Henri de Lubac, "Can a Will Be Essentially Good?" in *The Human Person and the World of Values. A Tribute to Dietrich von Hildebrand by his Friends in Philosophy*, ed. Balduin V. Schwartz [New York: Fordham University Press, 1960], 126–131). I am simply looking at the question from a presumed demonic perspective.

the Resurrection. But from our physically killing him, resurrection was possible. And with it, the fracture was to be healed.[23]

d. The Resurrection as the universal suture

The double event of Crucifixion and Resurrection is at the height of Christian tragedy. One aspect of the tragic dimension in general is that it celebrates defeat while excluding defeatism. In Greek tragedy, defeatism is overcome through the ultimate self-assertion of the human aspect even as it confronts the overriding impact of fate seen as "necessity" (*ananke*). The Christian notion of Crucifixion/Resurrection runs against the grain of Greek tragedy, because human defeat is not overcome through human effort. And yet, it is endowed with an even greater pathos. The essence of Christian tragedy, too, lies in the recognition that defeat, but not defeatism, lies at the core of human being—defeat, because the world is fractured of its own volition; but not defeatism, because the absolute undoes the undoing. It is thus that the essence of Christian tragedy is the Resurrection, as the universal suture that reconstitutes the ontic order of the created universe. It is thus that death, resurrection, and redemption are all co-terminus. In their inextricable link, both death and resurrection are essential to achieving redemption.

The notion of redemption means precisely that Jesus reconstructs reality. This view of redemption is especially close to that presented by the Oriental fathers:[24] thus the image of a *felix culpa* remains acceptable in the way in which the fact of the Crucifixion may be considered as *convenientissimum* [most fitting] (see below, fn. 26).

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[23]In this light, the following New Testament passages acquire special poignancy: "[H]e (the devil) is a killer since the beginning" (Jn 8:44); "[A]nyone who hates his brother is a killer, and you know that no killer has eternal life present in him" (1 Jn 3:15); "so that through death he may overpower the one who has the power of death, namely, the devil" (Heb 2:14).

[24]This notion is central to Eastern Christianity, see for instance the classic articles by Myrrha Lot-Borodine, republished in an Italian translation as *Perchè l'uomo diventi Dio* (Spiritualità orientale, Edizioni Qiqajon, 1999), especially 35, 40, and 42. The view I am advancing here combines both the Eastern and the Western sensitivity: God dies (with an emphasis on the hypostatic union as with the Eastern Fathers) but very humanly (with an emphasis on our human response as in the Western tradition). The notion of a *felix culpa* heightens the tension between ontology and psychology.

One of the central aspects of biblical revelation is that there is no essential distinction between morality and the ontic order, since God is the source of goodness and being. Hence redemption is not only the ransoming from sin, but the reconstructing of the integrity of the order of being. Not only is there ultimately an ontic integrity to reality (ontology); not only is there congruence between that integrity and our ability to know it (epistemology); there is also a fundamental congruence between ontology and morality. It is in this sense that redemption from sin is reconstitution of the ontic order.

A full discussion of this theme has to be left for another occasion. Here we must highlight the impact that all this has on sacramentality, which is rooted in the mirror image between the God-man being killed and the man-God being seated at the right hand of the Father: it is this continuity that bestows redemption. In this light, the fact of redemption tells us that God, for his part, refuses to accept this most personal denial which we, for our part, keep repeating. While our death wish has come true in sin by bringing about the Crucifixion, it has become void at the Resurrection. While wishing for myself to be my own fate; while effectively trying to bring this about by wishing Jesus, my true fate, dead; while, on the face of it, succeeding, as Jesus dies on the Cross—I then come up against his Resurrection, which nullifies my death wish, and in so doing offers me redemption.[25] Just as there is a "mystical" crucifixion in the (negative)

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[25]In some respects, the theology of the Cross (developed from such diverse points of departure as one can find in Stein, Balthasar, Moltmann, Rahner, Speyr) leads in this direction; with specific reference to the Sacred Heart see Joseph Ratzinger, "The Paschal Mystery as Core and Foundation of Devotion to the Sacred Heart," *Towards a Civilization of Love. A Symposium on the Scriptural and Theological Foundations of the Devotion to the Heart of Jesus* (San Francisco and Milwaukee, 1985), especially 154. See also, in the same volume, the masterly contribution by N. Hoffmann, "Atonement and the Ontological Coherence Between the Trinity and the Cross," especially 219–221 on the concept of the bearing of sin; 222 ("creaturely freedom is put by grace in a position of suffering sin into its opposite"); 225 ("sequestered into the Heart of the Son, sin can exist there only as the ineffable wounding of his love"); and 240–248 on sin as the "wounding" of the Trinity. Of course the notion that our individual sins are the cause of Jesus' death have been expressed consistently in piety—what I am doing here is to bring to its logical issue the theological instinct of piety, as I have also done in my article, "Ascension, Parousia, and the Sacred Heart: Structural Correlations," *Communio* 25, no. 1 (Spring 1998), on the basis of the old adage *lex orandi lex credendi*. It would not seem, however, that the ontological connection

sense described below (section 3e), so the actual Crucifixion brings about a mystical reintegration of the ontic order. "Mystical" means in this case sacramental: through Baptism, the seemingly successful attempt on God's life, i.e., his Crucifixion, becomes the affirmation of God's life, and the restoration of human nature.

If sin is not primarily disharmony but, ultimately, a murder wish, then redemption is not primarily redress of wrongs, but, through acceptance of the supreme wrong (i.e., deicide, the *heremosis*), it is an even greater ontic intervention than creation had originally been. In creation, the Logos was the bridge across the great divide that separates the infinite from the finite—without necessarily presupposing opposition on the part of the finite. In redemption, the Cross is now the new ontological bridge that anchors the two poles all the more dramatically onto the personal reality of the Crucified—dramatically, because the Crucified accepts the active opposition to himself as a bridge. As I try, through my sin, to put the Cross on Jesus, he carries me as his own Cross.[26] Christian personal ontology overcomes all

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between the Crucifixion and sin has been articulated quite in the same way as I am proposing here, from which unexpected developments follow. For instance, it seems proper to see the obedience of the Son as reciprocated by, we might say, the obedience of the Father: both are in fact abandoned by us, the sinners, and the triune God's acceptance of our supreme denial, the killing of the Son, is indeed trinitarian. Their obedience is to the ontic order which the Trinity represents, and the chalice which is not spared in Gethsemane is the resolve to restore this order by accepting our attempt to bring about the supreme, abominable injury of deicide. The *heremosis* of the Crucifixion reaffirms the ontic coherence of reality by accepting the ontic impact of sin. Hence the profound importance of the Catholic ontological understanding of redemption (vs. the forensic, Protestant view of it). It is in this light, too, that one can perhaps better appreciate the notion of the Ascension as being the moment when the Trinity "claims" the Incarnation; see my "Ascension, Parousia, and the Sacred Heart: Structural Correlations," 92–93.

[26]We may consider in this light the recurrent phrasing of Thomas Aquinas (see especially *ST* III, 46), which at first may appear almost blasphemous, about the event of the Crucifixion being *convenientissimum*, "most fitting" (see especially a. 4; see also q. 47, a. 2). No torment inflicted on anyone, much less Jesus, is fitting; but Aquinas' intent is rather to describe the ontological "necessity" of Jesus' death, as stressed in the announcements of the Passion, according to which "it must be" (*deî*) that Jesus will suffer (e.g., Mt 16:21). Having accepted humanity, he accepted the supreme betrayal by us, his fellow humans. The request at Gethsemane that the chalice might pass would, if granted, have repealed the very fact of the Incarnation. Hence the *convenientissimum* denial of the request: not out

proper concerns of deconstructionism by claiming that Jesus, the incarnate Logos, is the key to the ontic order because he affects, with his redemption, the core of reality. Which is also why redemption does not affect only those who are explicitly Christians, but, through the co-redemptive action of the Church, all of human history and culture.[27]

There might be a mythical way of looking at all this: a tapestry of thoughts that provides a conceptual framework within which intellect and fantasy may be satisfied. But Christians live it, instead, as a sacramental reality. The permanence of the Crucified who is risen and now sits at the right hand of the Father is encountered not mythically, but sacramentally. It is his life, his current life, that ultimately deconstructs any possible mythical understanding, and puts us in touch with the historical (non-archaeological!) reality of the Church.

e. Perspectives on original sin

We may look from this perspective at the concept of original sin.[28] If all sins are aimed at bringing about the death of Jesus, so was the first sin, in its intent to abolish God. It proved the very possibility of sinning, and the incalculable potential of such an act came to be grafted in human nature. The narrative of Genesis projects explicitly

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of some cruelty on the Father's part, but out of a shared trinitarian acceptance of the ultimate consequence of human freedom. The "fitting" acceptance of the ontological necessity of the Crucifixion is as if suspended in Mk 13:14, if we assume, as I suggested above in fn. 17, that the "abomination of desolation" is the Cross. Of it, it is said that it was erected where it "should not" (*hopou ou dei*). This parallels the terrible words about "the man who betrayed him" (Judas, but, with him, every sinner), that it would have been better had he not been born (Mt 26:24 | Mk 14:21). There is no contradiction here, but rather a total lack of fatalism.

[27]In the light of the Cross, all suffering can be viewed as co-acceptance, with the Trinity, of the ultimate abominable consequence of sin. And, just as all sins, from the primordial on down to mine, are directed against the very existence of Jesus, so all sufferings are lent, by him, a co-redemptive value and thus acquire their only possible meaning.

[28]It is not possible to refer here to the immense literature on the subject, but I would like to call attention to an important contribution in a classic, if little-known, study by Antonio Rosmini, *Antropologia soprannaturale*, vol. 1, ed. U. Muratore (Rome: Città Nuova, 1983), book 3, chapters 5–8, 383–480.

the cultural dimension of the event. There is arguing, there is convincing, there is sharing of experience. The culture of sin (the "culture of death") had a beginning, and could no longer be jettisoned. Even a single, first sin, had effectively, if "mystically," accomplished the Crucifixion. We may speak, as a counterpart of his mystical body, of a *mystical crucifixion* of Jesus, i.e., of the way in which our sins have ostensibly achieved their goal of removing God from existence. The "mystical" body is not an idealized concept, but a sacramental reality, which links human beings in a way that is very concrete and culturally defined. Analogously, my attempt to remove God from existence through the Crucifixion, each time I sin, is a mystical nail driven through his flesh, not metaphorically and in an idealized way, but in a way that accrues a very substantial responsibility on my part.

The death of God does take place, with the Crucifixion. But the Resurrection follows, and it negates forever our death wish. Through it, God offers us the possibility of being co-opted in his personal Resurrection, as well as, first, in his personal death. The channel offered is a sacramental one, the Baptism which human beings are called to undergo individually. The historical fact of his death and Resurrection is the redemption, but for it to become operative at our own individual level it is not sufficient to accept it as a fact; we must live it as a sacrament. As I affect personally and concretely the death of Jesus, so must I personally and concretely (sacramentally) be affected by his Resurrection. This sacramental grafting onto the death and resurrection of Jesus transforms me ontically: I share physically (sacramentally) in the reality of the ascended Son of man, and I am, more than I could ever have been, son of God. In Baptism, we are identified with the very effect that we have caused. The "mystical crucifixion" that we aim at Jesus (negatively) with our sin is now directed (positively) at us instead; it co-opts us as co-crucified: we are immersed in his Crucifixion, through that sacramental reality that makes a mystical dimension so fully concrete. The sign of the Cross is a constant reminder of these multiple registers of the Crucifixion: we cause the Cross, we affect the Crucifixion, and yet we are at the same time affected by it. We hang Jesus on the Cross, and yet we hang on it at the same time as on the tree that saves us from what would otherwise have been the total ontic shipwreck of our lives.

We can thus better appreciate, perhaps, how redemption affects original sin in its two basic dimensions, ontic and personal. Objectively (ontically), even a single sin was sufficient cause for the

death of Jesus, inasmuch as sin has as its ultimate goal the elimination of God. The death of Jesus, we have seen, seems to bring this expectation to its full realization: having achieved it is our abominable human stain. Yet Jesus rose and, risen, took his place within the Trinity: this annulled in turn, if not our death wish, at least the final sting of this death wish. And so subjectively (personally) we are given the chance to look beyond our death wish, to the risen ascended Jesus who lives even while he died. We are restored to sonship as we are proven ultimately incapable of achieving the goal that was inherent in our sinning. In fact, in Baptism I am associated with the very death that I have brought about, as if to experience the full impact of my sin in death and the full impact of his mercy in resurrection.

4. Presence

While the notion of ontological fracture, in the terms presented here, is not current in the literature, there is another explicit concern of deconstruction that is directly pertinent to our current interests, namely, the negative reaction to a "metaphysics of presence." The "construction" that is abhorred is in fact a mechanical control (epistemologically) over truth and a static perception of reality (ontologically) as a thing that can be manipulated: presence is then viewed as a projection of our own making that renders reality controllable and static. Conversely, the "deconstruction" that is advocated is the dynamism of thought constantly open to unpredictability and the recognition of a fluid reality that escapes any firm categorization. However, as it has often been observed, deconstruction thrives on paradox, and none is more crucial than the inherent trend within deconstruction to *construct deconstruction*, despite all warnings to the contrary. The denial of presence becomes itself a presence. In this section, I suggest that deconstruction gives voice to a very legitimate intellectual yearning, but that the answer, rather than in denial, lies in a very different understanding of what presence really is—i.e., the dynamic presence of a personal absolute. The embedding of this presence in our real world entails in turn the fundamental dimension of sacramentality. Precisely because it is not an abstract, fixed concept, "presence" takes the initiative and interacts with culture by empowering us, sacramentally, to respond.

a. The case for a parousia *metaphysics*

It is noteworthy that two closely related terms, *ousia* and *parousia*, have come to be so specialized in their valence as to make it almost impossible to perceive their intimate connection. *Ousia*, "being," is the reserve of philosophy, *parousia* (so commonly used as to eschew the need of translation) is the reserve of theology. And so the lively contemporary discussion about "presence metaphysics" seems to ignore that, technically, one is speaking precisely of a *parousia* metaphysics. Let us consider a few salient points that may help us understand the implications of this for our present concern with sacramentality.

The two related concepts of givenness and disclosure will help us understand this point.[29] Givenness refers to things that can be used, addressed, but do not disclose themselves. Disclosure, on the other hand, implies a dynamic and interactive dimension that is, in the first place, self-disclosure. It clearly is not in the nature of a treatise, for it does not expand in articulate logical fashion the nature of itself (the *ousia*) as an object. Rather it propels to the forefront (*para-*) the whole (*-ousia*). And this whole is a personal whole.

Thus far, we are in line with the fundamental intuition (or revelation, depending on one's point of view) of monotheism. This has been imaginatively developed in some strands of modern philosophy, for instance, by such Jewish thinkers as Martin Buber and Emmanuel Levinas. The "I-Thou" relationship, or the "alterity" of which they speak, go the core—and there is no better way to appreciate this than by noting how "alterity" is systemically impossible within polytheism. For, in polytheism, no self-disclosure by either the gods or fate is even conceivable.

What Christianity adds is the physical dimension of this alterity, through sacramentality. The Old Testament notion of revelation is already sacramental, in an incipient sort of way, because the "word" of God is a cultural vehicle endowed with its own physical dimension, whether spoken or written. But the supreme incarnation is in the person of Jesus, who is *the* sacrament. In him, the *par-ousia* acquires a whole new meaning: he is the personal absolute who comes

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[29]On these concepts see in particular, Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence. A Study in the Theology of Disclosure*, and Marion, *Reduction and Givenness: Investigations of Husserl, Heidegger and Phenomenology*.

forth and self-discloses through the fullest physical and cultural incarnation. Far from being frozen, as a static given, "presence" emerges with the full dynamic reality of a person who is irreparably enmeshed in corporeality and culture.

What deconstruction and postmodernism help bring to life is the great component of risk that faces us as we confront such presence. It is not so much that we reclaim deconstruction for Christianity, but rather that we show how the needs that deconstruction voices are in fact operative already in a Christian setting, but require being addressed differently—and more effectively—in Christian thought and practice. It is another way in which the groaning of the world (Rom 8:22) can be heard and answered. For the presence decried is not the presence we claim. It is not an object susceptible of control—because an object has no initiative of its own; it is not an object that poses no risk—because an object is predictable (in the measure to which we disassemble its component parts). Such predictability is at the root of polytheism[30]—where the limits of knowledge are matched only by the reach of progress; where the goal is to progressively map the genetic code of reality viewed ultimately as a single unified theory; where the absolute cannot will anything because it is the sum total of the parts that constitute reality (in time and space). On all counts, the presence we claim stands at the opposite polar end. The presence that comes forth, that self-discloses, namely, the *par-ousia*, is endowed with volition and initiative. This dynamic presence, this *par-ousia*, cannot be predicted, controlled or "constructed," but rather confronts us at our, and its, own risk. And this risk grows even greater when we claim the *parousia* as incarnate not just in the cultural medium of the biblical word, but in the physical and cultural confines of Jesus and of sacramentality.

b. The cognitive impact of love

The confrontation with this self-disclosing presence implies a wholly different type of understanding, rooted in tensionality. To the extent that we *can* understand, we *must keep striving* in our effort to understand, in the full knowledge that understanding will never exhaust, never "grasp" ("com-prehend") the absolute. Nor does the

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[30]From a different perspective, similar observations are advanced by Sokolowski, *The God of Faith and Reason. Foundations of Christian Theology*, 12–30.

tension aim to seize, but rather to surrender, because it expects the presence to come forth. (This is another major contrast with polytheism, where the impersonal absolute is never expected to come forth out of its own volition: there is no "Advent" in polytheism.) Such a dynamic tension toward a living presence, toward a *par-ousia*, is love. The fundamental correlative of this conviction, rooted in the dynamism of surrender, is that *we can neither construct nor deconstruct love*. It is of its essence that love abdicates control. And this has a profound impact on cognition.[31] Let us see how this is so, and, more specifically, how this is rooted in sacramentality.

The proposition that love is not subject to either construction or deconstruction rests in the first place on what has already been mentioned, namely, that love is incompatible with control. But there are other considerations as well. In the first place, love entails a wholeness that cannot be fragmented, cannot be broken down into component parts. Such wholeness is the natural counterpart of the inadmissibility of control. We cannot articulate an argument from which it follows that we must love someone—and yet love someone we must, inescapably and wholly. While not irrational, love cannot be rationalized. (An important analogy can be found in poetry, which can always best be understood as an explosion of unity while at the same time we can analyze it segmentally.)

At the same time, love cannot be aimed at the void. Love demands presence, and specifically a self-disclosing presence, a *par-ousia*—ultimately, a person. Here, too, we can say that "understanding" a person cannot be broken down into a rationalization: when I feel understood, it is not as the result of an argument that spells out logical steps, but because a tensionality is established with another

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[31]Profoundly rooted in Christian personalism, this view has taken new developments in recent times, from such diverse perspectives as those found in the work of Emmanuel Levinas and Jean-Luc Marion. An important recent contribution is David L. Schindler, "Is Truth Ugly? Moralism and the Convertibility of Being and Love," *Communio* 27, no. 4 (Winter 2000): 701–728. See also the republication of an old article by Michael Polanyi, "Faith and Reason," republished in *Communio* 28, no. 4 (Winter 2001): 860–874. In line with the desire to "retrieve the tradition," I may also refer to Dietrich von Hildebrand, who developed in detail the important notion of "superactuality," starting from the Augustinian *ordo amoris*. See his "Sittlichkeit und ethische Werterkenntnis," *Jahrbuch für Philosophie und phänomenologische Forschung* 5 (1921): 463–602; also see his *Christian Ethics* (New York: McKay, 1953), esp. 241–243 and 425.

person. This tensionality can certainly be subjected to rational considerations, to arguments, and can be helped by them, but it does not arise logically and inescapably from them.

All of this applies to love as a basic human dimension, found in friendship, marriage, and parenthood. But it applies just as well to our relationship with the absolute, at least in the monotheistic perception. The mystery we face is the particularity intrinsic in universality: the absolute comes forth of his own volition, willing particular and definable events and processes, thus also loving in a particular way. If the Old Testament already gives a dramatic version of this, the Incarnation as proposed by the New Testament does so to an even higher degree. Jesus is the incarnate absolute. In him, there is the most extreme manifestation of the *par-ousia* whereby the absolute comes forth and offers his own self-disclosure. The intense concreteness and particularity of the Incarnation can be more clearly perceived when seen within the broader biblical context—this being one of the ways in which the Old Testament indeed prepares us for the New. The absolute, who refuses all relativization, relates nevertheless to the finite. A particular relation does not negate absoluteness. Such particularity does not imply that we can "construct" the absolute, nor that we must, consequently, deconstruct "him"—any more than we can construct or deconstruct each other. Particularity makes the absolute relatable (yet not relative) through the unique tensionality of love. Through it, we claim understanding—yes, even "understanding" of the mystery.

Such a claim—to relate to that which is not relative, to understand that which cannot be fragmented—such a claim helps us to assess the true nature of sacramentality. Sacramentality is the bridge across the chasm, the means through which the relation is viable. That is why Jesus is the primordial and ultimate sacrament. Through his coming-forth, his self-disclosure, his *par-ousia*, we come face to face with the absolute. In the most concrete way, we look our destiny in the eye. And not through memory alone. The concrete sacramentality that irradiates from him through the Church is the foundation of our empowerment.

An important corollary of these considerations about the cognitive impact of love is its exact converse: the cognitive impact of

sin.[32] If the primordial sin is un-love, i.e., hatred, as expressed in the first place in our effort to see God dead, then its consequence is the denial of any viable relation with him. What follows is our own construction of the absolute, one that aims to subject him to our argumentative power of dissection and control. Sin is not just the domain of morality. Rather, in the profoundly integrative scope of Christian thought, it is a choice of the whole human being that conditions the entire realm of activities of which we are capable.

c. The distant presence

The unease of deconstruction reminds us not to take for granted the closeness of the presence. Presence remains, in fact, infinitely distant. Quite literally, the chasm is so marked as to seem to suggest that the presence on the one hand and we on the other are incapable of congruence. No wonder the very possibility of presence has come to be denied: the distance seems insurmountable, the presence so far away as to be invisible and voiceless.[33] I have referred to this above (in 3a) as the fractured universe, and have indicated one way in which this notion may be related to deconstruction. We may come back to this now from a different point of view. For precisely by denying the validity of presence, deconstruction heightens our sensitivity to it. It tells us, for instance, that if we seek to bridge the distance we cannot count on our ability to reason about the absolute, that we cannot seek to control it. And in this respect, too, the Christian attitude has always been more properly deconstructionist than deconstruction itself. Here is how.

The fundamental qualification that we need to remember is that *this infinite distance does not translate into infinite remoteness*. Of his own volition, the absolute bridges the chasm and reaches across it towards us, not obliterating the distance, but, precisely, bridging it. Our rejection has made his determination, his redemption, all the more dramatic (as I have argued in Section 3). Yet the distance remains. And we are called to acknowledge it. Such a dynamic

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[32]See the frequent references to this in John Paul II's encyclical *Fides et ratio*, especially sections 22, 43, 51,71, 76, and 82.

[33]An interesting psychological development of this theme will be found in the novel by Shusaku Endo, *Silence*, trans. William Johnston (New York: Taplinger, 1979).

recognition of the distance is *adoration*—which emerges, then, not as a mere act of homage, however profound, but as an ontological profession, an existential acknowledgment of the chasm and the bridge. For this reason, adoration is possible exclusively within a monotheistic perspective, and when the term is used for polytheism, it is truly a misnomer. Adoration, then, is the acceptance of the infinite distance of the presence, and as such, it has a profound liberating effect.

As knowledge of the absolute, personally understood, adoration affirms the cognitive value of love. The congruence of reality is indeed perceived at the cognitive level, because disparate elements are seen to display an unsuspected coherence. Adoration does not propose a "logocentric" demonstration, but the structural and systemic coherence that emerges is, in turn, coherent with every other aspect of our cognitive universe. While adoration is a one-way movement from the finite to the infinite, love is the reciprocal movement that binds the two. Adoration can only be realized through a motion of reciprocated love: and it is from this matrix that a cognitive realization of ontological congruence arises, beyond any need of being deconstructed. Adoration affirms, as it were, a *congruence of the incongruous*. On the one hand, the infinite and the finite dimensions are irreducible, and there is no proper congruence between the two. In this respect, we are as if at the interface between two "epochs" (in deconstructionist terms), and a way to express this (again, with a deconstructionist notation) would be to write it "under erasure."[34] On the other hand, the Christian response to the contradiction inherent in such erasure is neither to lift it through a mere acknowledgment, nor to sublimate it through a logical synthesis of opposites; it is rather to see how the personal dimension inherent in the infinite bridges the abyss and constitutes a proper ontic congruence where there would otherwise be none. Beyond that, and within the order of history, it *re*-constitutes this order even when willfully (i.e., personally) broken. Adoration is then both recognition of incongruity and acceptance of the gift of congruence.

Adoration, then, is, and is not, logocentric (alternatively, in Derrida's terms, it is logocentric "under erasure"). *It is not* logocentric in Derrida's sense, because it does not stop at the "phonological" dimension of the argument. It does not, in other words, circumscribe

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[34]*Sous rature*, in Jacques Derrida's terms; see especially *Of Grammatology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 59–62, and the interesting introductory remarks by Gayatri C. Spivak, xiii–xx.

and limit a perceived reality within an argumentative, nominalistic, or "phonocentric," cage. And yet *it is* logocentric in the sense that it accepts the logos as a person who is not in any way encaged and takes the initiative to make *him*self known. It is precisely because the logos is "known" personally—because there is a cognitive dimension to this personal relationship—that logocentrism in Derrida's sense is negated at the root: one can only love a presence, hence the "metaphysics of presence" is absolutely central, and cannot be deconstructed in the sense proposed by him. Obviously, Christianity is Logocentric rather than logocentric.

It emerges from this view of adoration how and why the virtue of humility, so central to Christianity, is quite the opposite of an abject form of impotence. Humility is the realization, on a personal level, of the great fracture, and as such it carries the value of an ontological confession—"personified by her who knew neither the event nor the effects of the Great Fracture: *quia respexit humilitatem ancillae suae*" (P. Mankowski's comment in a personal communication). It is ironic that, seen in this perspective, Christian humility stands on equal footing with Nietzsche's will to power, in a converse way. On the one hand, Nietzsche, and the wide reach of postmodern thought after him, recognizes the fracture and aims to heal it by relativizing the absolute. In so doing, one claims, as polytheism does, human control over the fracture. On the opposite side, the monotheistic revelation, and the Christian revelation in particular, affirms an even more substantial fracture between the two sides of the divide, and claims that the human ability to heal it resides not in control but in acceptance—acceptance of the divine initiative. There is no less courage and tragic splendor in Christian humility than in the Nietzschean (ultimately, Promethean and polytheistic) conception.

Humility stands then in a direct correlation to adoration. Adoration is a state of awe in front of the absolute and an active recognition of the same absolute on the other side of the fracture. Humility is the exact converse: a state of awe in consideration of my nothingness and an active recognition that the absolute reaches for this same nothingness across the great divide. Humility does of course translate into a psychological attitude, but it is, at the root, an ontological statement. It is for this reason that it is not reckoned among the theological virtues, just as adoration is not. Humility underlies, as it were, the very possibility of faith, hope, and charity; it constitutes the framework within which they are possible in the first place.

The main reason why humility acquires an even greater centrality in the Christian perception is the sacramental dimension. Jesus is a teacher who describes a line of conduct, he is a model who proposes a living example to be followed, but his claim reaches far beyond a mere request for a conceptual and a behavioral adaptation to his thought and his style of life. Such conceptual and behavioral aspects, important though they of course are, are part and parcel of normal human culture. The sacramental culture that Jesus claims to offer goes beyond thought and conduct, not because they do not matter, but because they are rooted in something even deeper—his own sacramental self. He is the vine and we the branches, his sap is the sacramental life that makes our transformation (*metanoia*, conversion) possible.

d. The desire that claims

A critical question arises: If Jesus is the ontological pivot of reality; if "presence" is so pervasive that it cannot remain unseen; if sacramentality is the concrete avenue through which humans are so affected by the *par-ousia*—why, then, is it that, culturally and historically, Christianity is so limited? For, however far-reaching its missionary zeal, however widespread its geographical reach, however long-lasting its history, the Church is far from embracing the whole of humanity in our own time, not to mention the countless generations who lived even before revelation took place. How can there possibly be a limited ontology? Besides, Christians remain sinners, in fact, the more despicable our sin the closer we have been brought to grace: so, can there possibly be a tainted ontology? I suggest here two answers, which I will propose in this and in the following section. Both answers pertain to the nature of apostolate, seen, as it were, in a metaphysical dimension. The first answer centers on the notion of apostolate as conscious outreach, and the second on the notion of apostolate as cultural irradiation. The first is seen as specifically linked to the person of Jesus, the second to the person of the Spirit.

The inner spring of apostolate is desire. We wish a sharing. In this, apostolate can be analyzed alongside intercessory prayer. God's creation is a sharing of his goodness. This sharing establishes in the first place the reality of being. But it establishes at the same time another reality as well—the expansive potential of being. On the ontological level, God names the universe (Gn 1:4, etc.), and then man names the

other creatures (2:19). On the moral level, God creates goodness (1:10, etc.), and this goodness echoes the divine initiative by reproducing itself (1:28). Creation is empowered with a sharing in creation. Accordingly, our desire is not so much an attempt to change the divine reality—which is not vectorial in the first place. Rather, creation is the vectorial correlative, in space and time, of the uncreated goodness by which it has been posited—a vector being a thrust defined by direction. Accordingly, there is a creative power intrinsic to prayer which turns intercession and apostolate into the very operative act of goodness that is invoked. It is not that God "repents" because humans can nudge him against his original inclination; it is not that a conversion happens because God pulls some appropriate strings, but rather that human desire contributes to implementing operatively, in a world of change, the underlying creative goodness of God. The emblematic text in this respect is the narrative about Abraham's intercessory prayer on behalf of Sodom, where the presence of even just ten upright men is deemed sufficient by God to save the entire city (Gn 18:23–32; see also Jer 5:1; Ez 22:30; Is 53:4f).

Also emblematic, in a Christian and properly sacramental dimension, is the notion of a baptism of desire, or the notion of a "spiritual communion," once a lively facet of daily piety that has today receded into the background.[35] But the apostle's, the missionary's urge is in the first place the articulation of this desire—for others. We wish somebody baptized, reconciled, anointed, and we hand over the efficacy of our desire to God who alone can implement the desire, in and through the sacramental efficacy of the Church. We have seen how, in a Christian perspective, "presence" is not static. It is rather *parousia*, the coming forth as well as the being here, the irradiation from a center. Love and desire are intrinsic attributes of this Presence, and the concrete embodiment of this outward movement is the sacramental dimension. Sacramentality is, as it were, the dynamic outreach of the presence. It is its apostolate.

As it must be ours. If Christian desire claims the universe, it cannot possibly do so out of a misguided and naive triumphalism. We "claim" not through the arrogance of appropriation, but through the acceptance of a promise, through the awareness of a sacramental grafting. Every human desire for good is ultimately so grafted, we

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[35]See the appraisal of the practice in John Paul II's encyclical, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 34.

believe, only because the sacramental presence of the Church endows every such human desire. *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* not because there is a "space beyond" from which some are excluded, but because the "space beyond" is in fact space within, because the Church extends salvation to all humans, mysteriously allowing all a share of her inner reality through her sacramental presence. Rooted as we are in sacramental presence, our desire is empowered by God's desire: we wish his wishes. Even a desire that is mired in sin, as all our desires are bound to be however minimally, any desire that claims God's mercy finds it, because any such desire is nourished by the irradiation of sacramental presence. Instead of "anonymous Christians," we should therefore speak of "co-opted" Christians: everyone's sincere urge for God is co-opted by the sacramental reality of the Church that is physically, culturally present and so colors the whole universe. Sacramentality is rooted in face-to-face confrontation; it avoids the anonymity of a generic prayer felt only as wishful thinking. We should not envisage a diffused sort of sacramentality, as if a bland version of animism. Rather, sacramentality rests on a very specific tensionality, which gives a clear sense of direction to our desire and proposes a tangible goal to our reach. And this is because our yearning is not directed toward the void, it is rather rooted in acceptance—first of all, acceptance of the physical means placed at our disposal in the sacraments.

Thus the first, partial answer to the question posed at the beginning of this section—how can sacramentality be a vehicle for ontology, given that sacramentality is so historically limited and circumscribed—is that sacramentality is like an endowment that actively reaches out. This outreach is, indeed, limited and circumscribed because it is incarnate in culture. Christians speak given languages, act in given behavioral modes, love specific individuals. But in so doing, they irradiate, dynamically, a grace that pervades the world. The core of the answer to our question is that this grace is not merely a dimension of religion seen as a separate segment of reality; grace is rather the efflorescence of the divine invasion, it is the continuity of creation. Just as creation did not pose religion as distinct from being, so grace does not affect merely a religious as distinct from an ontological dimension. Creation established being, and grace upholds it.

In this light, we come to appreciate in a new light the sacrament of Confirmation. It provides the springboard that makes the

communication of grace possible in the first place. Confirmation is properly the sacrament of apostolate: it gives the power to reach out and communicate grace. And in the perspective proposed here, it gives the power to communicate being. This awesome scenario shows how Christianity, and Catholicism in particular, has beautifully implemented, long since, one of the basic postures that postmodernism is now articulating in a different vein—being is not statically constructed, it is not divorced from life. It is rather rooted in personal interaction. Analogously, God is not a static source of being, an anonymous force, but rather a personal reality who irradiates dynamically by empowering us persons to irradiate in turn. We claim because he claims, we desire because he desires.

And this brings us to the second answer.

e. Presence superabundant

To suggest a correlation between ontology and redemption, and consequently to propose a metaphysical valence for apostolate may well seem absurd to a philosopher, and of no import to a missionary. If I wish, nevertheless, to propose just such an axiom it is because of the fundamental underlying belief in the unity of being. Here, too, the doctrine pertaining to the Holy Spirit offers a powerful answer to our yearning, as embodied in postmodernism, for a balance between provisionality and permanence, particularity and universality. The "presence" that irradiates is not an impersonal fluid, but rather a personal choice exercised both eternally and in the here-and-now. The intervention of this presence is provisional and particular because it affects the domain of creation, but it is at the same time permanent and universal because the subject, in the person of the Spirit, is absolute and eternal. A mystery, indeed, but one of which we can articulate the terms and accept the impact—as an answer, specifically, to the deconstructionist and post-modern paradox.

It is also in this light that we can appreciate how sacramentality in the Christian sense has a specific range of meaning that restricts it to the operations envisaged by what has come to be circumscribed in a specific set, the seven sacraments of the Church. In a broader sense, every divine involvement in the temporal is sacramental. In this respect, creation itself is the supreme sacrament, inasmuch as it is the most acute and indispensable manifestation of such an involvement. But the specific Christian sense brings sacramental reality back to the historical will of Jesus. The protracted legacy envisaged by him is as

historical as his own action was. The Spirit is the guarantor, the "advocate,"[36] who becomes incarnate through the specific historical institution of the sacramental Church.

Redemption took place at a given point in time, defined by the Incarnation, death, Resurrection, and Ascension of Jesus. However, we do not share in it simply because it happened. Mere knowledge of it, or even acceptance of it, is not the vehicle through which we are personally touched by it. It is, rather, the sacramental reality willed by him that, like sap in a tree, actually and physically permeates the world: the vine and the branches. Just as we personally sin and contribute to the death of Jesus, so, too, we are personally touched by his redemption, through a sacramental channel and through the presence that radiates forth beyond all the limits. It is a presence "superabundant," the presence of the Spirit who touches whom he wills, eternally, but through the channels defined historically in time and space. In this, too, sacramentality uses the mechanisms of culture: culture is not experience, but nourishes it by transmitting, through personal contact, given modes of perception; in a similar way, the sacraments transmit, through human personal contact in time and space, that other personal contact that the Spirit chooses to initiate from outside time and space.

Herein, then, lies the second answer to the question as to how realistic the all-inclusive Christian claim can be. If there is an intrinsic value to the Christian embrace of the world, it is not of its mere volition, but only because it is so empowered sacramentally. This is the essence of apostolate and of the missionary effort. And it is so because, beyond our conscious individual desire that claims all our fellow humans, there is the even more profound "groaning" of the Spirit within the Church. Through it, sacramentality exhibits a presence that suffuses and soaks, as it were, our whole culture, always with the specific directionality of a personal choice and will—that, precisely, of the Spirit.

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[36]The *parakletos* may be viewed as the one who is called upon to witness God's reality to humans as well as the one who supports the human cause in front of God. The Spirit is as much *God's* "advocate" (guarantor) to the world as he is man's "advocate" (helper) in front of God. In this sense, the concept would be the sacramental extension of the notion that God is "faithful": while faithfulness refers to God's attitude, "advocacy" refers to his continued historical involvement, and implementation thereof, through the sacraments.

The profound implications of the Catholic insistence on sacramental realism become clear in this perspective. The effects of Baptism cannot be merely forensic, as in the Protestant view, precisely because the transformation effected in the baptized affects in turn the non-baptized. In the final analysis, the only apostolate is the apostolate of presence—our individual, conscious presence that is rooted in the deeper Presence. As Christians we are called to be salt, to be leaven—neither, it must be noted, very appetizing by itself. Thus, if there is a triumph to be sought, it is but that of the unappetizing salt or leaven, or of the humble seed that dies in the ground—ultimately, of the Cross. Salt, leaven, the dying seeds, all are good catalysts that, in proper hands, are used to turn something good into something even better. But the essential presupposition is that we be, intrinsically and not just forensically, "good." Apostolate is the self-declaration of Presence through our individual presence.

In this light we can also better appreciate the Catholic insistence on co-redemption. Apostolate and the missionary effort entail our becoming co-redeemers, not through the external performance of forensic acts, but through our very existence as transformed beings. We co-redeem because we are co-opted, assumed, grafted onto the one Redeemer—not because we can lay a claim through our own understanding, but because we are claimed through his sacramental presence. Following Jesus' exhortation, we are not to worry about what we will say (Mt 10:19–20). But this is not because reliance on an external mechanism will supply the missing words; rather, it is because our miserly presence will serve as a channel for his presence, sacramentally. Of course, persuasion of words will count, as will even more the example of life, but at the root and the heart of the impact will be the sacramental reality of our presence, *tout court*.

This spreading-forth of sacramental reality is not limited to where it affects only the explicit apostolic effort. If the *parousia* is fully metaphysical in its import, then the universe—secular, natural, religious, supernatural—is entirely affected by it. It is not the torn veil of the temple (the symbol of ontic disorder at the Crucifixion) that will affect the ontic order as such; it is rather the resurrection and the presence of the ascended Jesus within the Trinity. Hence, sacramental desire claims all beings, however imperceptibly or mysteriously. The resurrected and ascended Jesus is the ontic pivot of reality. And the sacramental reality of the Church, present as a tangible cultural reality in human history, is the one perceptible vehicle for this desire to take

form under our forms, and so to remain until the end of time. If sin coincides with ontological demotion, if redemption coincides with a restructuring of the fracture, then any share in the redemptive effort contributes to this restructuring.

We spoke (4b) of the cognitive impact of love. An essential component of it is the abdication of control wherein, I argued, lies a positive correlation between Christianity and deconstruction. Nowhere is this more urgent an attitude, perhaps, than in the apostolic posture we are all called to assume. It is, it seems to me, the specific gift of the sacrament of Confirmation that it empowers us to offer Presence. We are then co-opted within the *par-ousia*, as we, through our having been confirmed, are asked to help this newly founded order of being (*ousia*) to come forth (*para-*). Not only are we called to share in being (the *ousia*), but also to share in the presence (the *parousia*). The sacrament of Confirmation is, in effect, the sacramentalization of apostolate.

It is only through an excessive shift of emphasis, I believe, that special reverence to the reserved species and especially the solemn adoration of the exposed host has come to be downplayed in current practice.[37] It is curious that this could have happened at a time when, with the spirituality of Charles de Foucauld, such a new deep sensitivity has been introduced in the Church for the presence of the Presence: the real Presence in the Eucharist is a factual presence that ennobles and sanctifies even when it remains hidden and unknown to its environment. In the Eucharist the sacramental *parousia* is at its highest, the host being, as it were, a concrete *maranatha* in its dual sense—*mâran 'ethâ* "our Lord has come" and is now present in a mysterious sacramental corporeality; *mâranâ thâ* "come, oh Lord" and become part of me, of us, through your physical communion with us.[38] This dynamic presence that is meant by the concept of *parousia* is displayed in the Eucharist not only as *fractio panis* and communion, but also as a physical consistency. Such a dynamic presence, such a

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[37]For some interesting reflections on the subject see Roch Kereszty, "A Theological Meditation on the Liturgy of the Eucharist," *Communio* 23, no. 3 (Fall 1996): 555–559. See now also John Paul II's encyclical *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 25.

[38]See my article "Ascension, Parousia, and the Sacred Heart: Structural Correlations," 73.

sacramental *parousia*, is the manifestation in our human world of the ascended Jesus who sits at the right hand of the Father.

As we contemplate the exposed host, we contemplate, *inter alia*, the ennobling of our culture by God. If the sacrament of Order speaks to the level of cultural transmission, the sacrament of the Eucharist speaks as well to the level of cultural creativity. For this is the only sacrament for which the carrier is not a human person, but an impersonal manufact—bread and wine. It is not insignificant to note that bread and wine are relatively recent inventions within human development, as they were first produced towards the very end of prehistory, a mere eight to ten thousand years ago. Given the pertinent Old Testament imagery, one might have expected the Eucharistic meal to use the meat of a lamb as a sacramental vehicle. But instead of the flesh of an animal, Jesus chose a cultural manufact, offering humanity the privilege to offer him in turn their handiwork. The offertory prayer ("which human hands have made") has a special ring to our ears if we can attune our sensitivity to that of a prehistorian: for hundreds of thousands of years, human hands had not made bread or wine, and there could have been no Eucharist as we know it. In this respect, truly, God stoops to where he accepts what our human culture can produce. Borrowing the language used to describe the mystery of the Incarnation, we may say that, in the Eucharist, Jesus assumed the nature of our culture.

To contemplate the Eucharist in the reserved species is a moving testimony to all this. We contemplate the ennobling of our culture, as Jesus who is at the right hand of the Father continues to choose the elemental corporeality of a cultural manufact to proclaim his mystery: his humanity is within the Trinity and within the bread and wine. As in the case of the argument developed with regard to deconstruction (see above), our culture, which is in itself worthless and hopeless of any ontological value, is "reconstructed" by Jesus and brought back to full ontic status. A useful analogy can be drawn from the sacrament of marriage. Clearly, marriage is not to be reduced to the event of the wedding, nor to the succession of specific events of spousal interaction. Just as the explicit awareness, in fact, the "contemplation" of one's spouse is a strong "sacramental" component of marriage, so, *mutatis mutandis*, the adoration of the exposed host is a strong sacramental (hence, undoubtedly, liturgical) component of the Eucharist. There is, indeed, a dynamics to the consecration, the *fractio panis*, the communion, which transcends the moment. And yet: lest we

confuse the dynamics of living with the whirlwind of making busy, the dynamics of marriage with the mere routine of living together, the dynamics of the Eucharist with the dramatic reenactment of a play—lest we are overtaken by action for action's sake, we are reminded in contemplation that anchors are not fetters. Indeed, without moorings there is no journey, but only vagrancy. Thus, rather than dismissing the contemplation of the exposed host as unliturgical, we should use it as a paradigm to be applied to the rest of the fabric of life.

Besides marriage, the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick may also be seen in a new light when considered in this perspective. It has been a welcome innovation to see how the proper significance of this sacrament goes vastly beyond the single moment of the "extreme unction." In current practice, it is viewed in fact as helping at all stages, and in all kinds, of diseases, well before they become terminal. But it might be extended even farther, so that we may see in it a validation of suffering as such, a sacrament whereby suffering is grafted onto, assumed by, Christ. Like all sacraments, the anointing, too, is a gift that engages: it provides comfort, but it demands a yielding. And like the Eucharist, in particular, it radiates its efficacy beyond the immediate beneficiary—by touching, as it were, all human suffering and rooting it in the one redemptive act of Christ. Through it, our culture of suffering, if we may so call it, is captured by Christ and properly sacramentalized, i.e., endowed with worth and efficacy. Not just the suffering of the Christian, of the individually anointed, but the suffering of humankind as a whole. Just as the exposed host radiates presence, so the anointing radiates strength—not just, and perhaps not so much, the strength to accept suffering, but especially the strength to transform it into a redemptive act, by grafting it onto *the* redemptive act of Jesus, killed, risen, and ascended. Through the sacrament of the anointing, Jesus claims human suffering and gives it meaning. Paul's statement that something "is left over of the sufferings of Christ" (Col 1:24: *ta hysteremata ton thlipseon*. See above, fn. 17) can be related to the notion of the anointing as claiming. Christ claims human sufferings as his own: they are lacking because they are his.

5. *Conclusion: Ontology as Christology*

My intent in this article was to explore three aspects of contemporary thought—the role of tradition in the face of progress and

change; deconstructionism; and the rejection of a metaphysics of presence—in order to gain insight into the phenomenon of sacramentality. In so doing, I looked at sacramentality from the double perspective of a Catholic and a secular worldview. In the process, I have proposed fresh ways of looking (1) at the papacy and the Church as the "house of Peter"; (2) at deconstruction as a polytheistic proposal that helps to understand the monotheistic view of sin and redemption (sin as a universal rift that relativizes the absolute and culminates in the killing of Jesus, and redemption as a universal suture that, through the resurrection of Jesus, reaffirms the proper nature of the absolute); and, finally, (3) at the *parousia* as the supra-temporal and yet historical self-revelation of the absolute, in a way that gives a new meaning to the ontological concept of presence.

We have thus seen how sacramentality can be presented as a special dimension of human culture, namely, as (under the same three headings) (1) the personal and physical contact embodied in the succession of an unbroken line of human individuals; (2) the physical property whereby the sacraments are given to us as the vehicle through which our individual sins are individually touched by redemption, with procedures that are normal for such transmission within human culture; and (3) the impact that sacramental presence has in touching all humans through other humans, again through a process analogously found in culture, where humans are purveyors of experience to each other.

Such a perspective helps us to see the profound bond between ontology and ethics, between ontology and the world of the concrete and the physical.[39] Sin has an ontological consequence, and all the more so does redemption. Christ-less, reality would collapse. Such a collapse was the aim of the temptations of Christ, and, temptation having failed, of the Crucifixion. Such was the victory of the Resurrection. A collapsed reality would be a pervasive hell. A redeemed reality

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[39]The growing body of writing by David L. Schindler deals extensively with this very issue: see in particular, with regard to sacramentality, "Creation and Nuptiality: A Reflection on Feminism in Light of Schmemann's Liturgical Theology," *Communio* 28, no. 2 (Summer 2001); on exploring the notions of "natural sacramentality," and "ontological sacramentality" in Schmemann, see "Trinity, Creation, and the Order of Intelligence in the Modern Academy," *Communio* 28, no. 3 (Fall 2001), especially 410, 414 ("convertibility of being and love"), and 418 ("opposition, or . . . simple juxtaposition, between sacrament and the natural world").

is a world in-graced, i.e., a world coherent with God. The exclusive vehicle for such coherence is the sacramentality embodied in the Church. Thus it is that sacramentality as well acquires, in our eyes, a profound ontological dimension. The missionary impact of the Church goes beyond the communication of the Creed and the amelioration of human ills: it embodies salvation from hell, salvation from full ontological collapse for believers and non-believers alike. In this process, culture is assumed and offered in return. Our hands offer the bread and the wine so that the world, in turn, may be offered the sacrament of his presence; that, through him, the world be touched; that, through him, all the filaments of our scattered reality may be brought back together in the coherence of grace.

The dominant role of Jesus in culture, i.e., the very concept of a proper Christian culture (as distinct from a christic one), seems preposterous to those looking from the outside and requiring impersonal standards of rationality. How can the universe, in fact reality itself, be centered on, and totally revolve around, a person? And yet, this is precisely the yearning that much of contemporary thought expresses. Ultimately, deconstruction and post-modernism make a strong secular case for a Christian metaphysics. They stress the paradox of provisionality and certainty (certainty about provisionality, as it were), or, we might say, dynamism within permanence. It is, in some ways, a restatement of the age old confrontation of Heraclitus vs. Parmenides (which in fact reaches back into the great myths of Syro-Mesopotamia). But in other ways it can be viewed as a dim restatement of the Christian claim: when interacting with Jesus as the pivot of reality, Christians ride the crest of a wave, a crest that advances constantly, is always at the summit, yet cannot be seized. There is a firm provisionality, as it were, in this dynamics.

To illustrate this, and by way of a conclusion, we will look at three corollaries.

a. Culture as materia sacramenti

The Incarnation is the fundamental correlate of sacramentality. Through the sacraments, Jesus claims our culture through time, as he claimed our human nature from Mary and a specific history from ancient Israel. Conversely, through the sacraments, we claim God in our culture. Reliving John's sense of wonder ("what we have heard, what we have seen with our eyes, what we have contemplated and our

hands have touched": 1 Jn 1:1), through the sacraments we look God in the eye. But our claim is at the same time an offer, a consecration. We offer our culture, that it may become ingraced.

Indeed, a proper understanding of sacramentality is an essential precondition if we are to "in-grace" culture rather than to "in-culture" grace. Christian thought argues for a fundamental ontological and epistemological coherence (hence, for meaning) of reality *tout court*—material and spiritual, finite and infinite, etc. It argues, in Schindler's terms,[40] for the integral connection between the orders of intelligence and being—not only in the sense that sacramentality is intelligible (for all that it remains a mystery), but that it provides understanding. To *speak* about "being" means to speak about Christ, and in turn to *speak* about him, means ultimately to "live" his sacraments. Thus it is that culture is effectively the *materia sacramenti*, not viewed mechanistically, but rather because it is anchored in the reality of a living organism, the Church. Sacramentality empowers culture with a new value, which does not alter its specificity, but endows it with a new dimension.

Admittedly, cogent sacramental referentiality poses a problem of presuppositions for secular discourse, and thus it distinguishes a proper Christian discourse from one that may be considered merely christic. The latter does not presuppose sacramentality as part of the logical argument; hence it can be more easily received. This is ultimately the appeal of what is sometimes called "liberal" Christianity—an appeal deriving from the fact that one shares more premises with non-Christians and accordingly one can more easily develop a mutually acceptable argument.[41] There is certainly no harm in so

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[40]"The crucial issue turns on what one means by 'new inculturation': on whether the newness is such as to permit the 'circumincession' of the newly inculturated spirituality with the normative spirituality of God . . . the fiat. It is this Gospel which always and everywhere gives the a priori form for the new inculturation of Christian spirituality" (Schindler, *Heart of the World*, 101); "primacy of receptivity"; "insufficient accounts of what is implied in 'participating' . . . slide too quickly into 'creativity'" (103); "the form of love carried in the Church as *communio* affects the very order of civilization" (187); "inculturation of faith" (Schindler, *Catholicism and Secularization in America*, 13); "What Christ is by nature, all else in the cosmos both is and is to become by adoption and participation" (171).

[41]An analogous argument is developed by David L. Schindler in a series of articles on the modern academia, see "The Catholic Academy and the Order of

presenting, christically, certain basic intuitions that affect secular discourse on its own terms—as was the case, for instance, with the notion of person following Augustine. This is also the appeal of modern Jewish thought, from Buber to Levinas, which can more readily be grasped in secular terms, precisely because it functions wholly outside the notion of sacramentality. A christic, non-sacramental conceptualization of the message of Jesus is clearly easier to accept than, for instance, the recognition of the Eucharist as the ontological pivot of reality, with all its physicality and ordinariness. Yet this is precisely the starting point of Christian culture.

As it is of Christian experience.

b. The Christian experience

Sacramentality defines the Christian experience. This is not to imply a barrier between Christian (sacramental) and "human" (non-sacramental) experience. On the contrary, Christians live as Christians every aspect and moment of human culture, from a scientific discovery or athletic exploit to the acceptance of pain and defeat. The Cross is with all of us humans, but for a Christian it comes with Jesus on it. And it is sacramentality that, precisely, allows us to share concretely in his still hanging, with us, on our crosses. But what is, then, the modality of this exclusive Christian experience? In other words, how is it that the sacraments affect us to the point that we can say we "experience" them? How is it that we can properly speak of experience and not of a mythical fantasy?

I do not, certainly, lay claim to a psychological experience of the effects of a sacrament, as if I could tell from what I feel that I have or have not received a sacrament. I refer rather to the awareness of new realities in which I can share only in virtue of having been sacramentally touched. An analogy might help make the point. When crossing a border, the landscape does not change: I could not tell from my sensory experience that I am, say, in Switzerland at the moment I have crossed the border coming from Italy. But for a resistance fighter escaping from his pursuers during the Second World War, the awareness of the crossing meant everything. There was indeed an experience of the border, with an overwhelming sense of liberation

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Intelligence: The Dying of the Light?" *Communio* 26, no. 4 (Winter 1999), esp. 730–732 and 739; and see the titles cited above in fn. 38.

ensuing. Freedom was not a fantasy, because the border was a reality, however imperceptible to the senses in terms of the landscape. Like a border, sacramental reality leads us to an awareness of new landscapes that affect us deeply—marked by signposts that are cultural and as such susceptible of sensory experience. Here we have room to refer briefly to only two examples.

The first is the experience of Baptism. The aspect to be considered here is the awareness it produces of belonging to that wider range of relationships known as the "communion of the saints." Having been grafted physically onto Jesus as a channel of grace, I share in the expansive nature of that very grace. This awareness affects profoundly my human experience of human bonding. By virtue of Baptism, for example, I am allowed to "feel" a unique connection with those I have known and loved and who are now dead. It is a unique, i.e., a uniquely Christian, experience because the awareness of Baptism endows my memory of them with the capacity to touch them through the power of that superabundant grace onto which we are jointly grafted. Obviously, the cult of the dead as such is not a uniquely Christian phenomenon. But a memory that is aware of its own co-redemptive reach is unique.

The second example is marriage. What is uniquely Christian here is the way in which the sacrament anchors two human beings, and the family that springs out of them, in a trinitarian dimension. The indissolubility of the bond between husband and wife and of the bond between parents and children, far from being borne as a legal burden, proclaims a unique aspect of love which is an echo of what we know about the Trinity: the total blending of particularity and universality. Husband and wife, parents and children have an exclusive relationship which is fully exclusive of others—and yet is not egoistic. The particularity makes it exclusive: across time, lives are bonded to a measure in which no one else can share. And yet, the more exclusive marriage is, the more inclusive it becomes, in that the love so lived radiates and nurtures. It is a properly and unique Christian experience to know that one cannot become un-married, any more than one can become un-parented. Only the awareness of the sacrament affords us the richness of such a profound human experience.

The Christian experience, then, revolves around the way in which sacramental reality affects our perception and our very being. The recent upheaval in American society with regard to pedophilia among priests has served in an indirect way to draw attention to this

important point about sacramentality. The urgency with which the media, the commentators, and the public have been asking that the guilty be removed from the priesthood, not just from the ministry, highlights a fundamental misunderstanding about the notion of "character" that underlies the whole Catholic view of sacramental reality. One cannot become "un-priested," any more than one can become "un-baptized" or "un-married." Hence also the coherence of the Catholic position about divorce: it is only if the marriage does not exist in the first place (if it is "null") that there is no marriage. Annulment is not retroactive de-sacramentalization, but rather the recognition of an initial defect in virtue of which a seemingly sacramental relationship had been established but the sacrament had not in fact taken place.

c. The absolute event

The notion of an "absolute event," so phrased, evokes at first the impression that we are dealing with a single event—say creation, or the Incarnation, or the end of the world. But this impression evinces a fundamental misapprehension, one rooted in the polytheistic view that aims at fragmenting the absolute—because, in this line of thought, the absolute event is thought to be one of many, one in a series of numerable events. The alternative, monotheistic understanding of this notion is that the absolute event is absolute in that it has an absolute subject. Thus any event that involves God in the world of the finite is absolute. This is, at the root, the great intuition of the Old Testament with its development of what we call "sacred history." Every moment of God's involvement with Israel is "sacred" in the specific sense that it is "absolute." In this view, no event with God as subject can be relative, and history is always, and fundamentally, eschatology. Hence it is that our very temporality and provisionality are rooted in the eternal, the physicality of our spatial constraints is rooted in the infinite.

Sacramentality is the articulation of this process. True, sacred history is already sacramental: it represents the story of God's involvement and interaction with the finite. But sacramentality is more specific and explicit. It reflects a conscious choice on the part of Jesus to embody cultural institutions with a specific self-revelation of himself as the absolute. Just as he is, impossibly, the absolute-relative, the God-man, so sacramentality is the bridge that allows us, impossibly,

the same hyphenation. The sacraments provide the channel for "relatability" (not relativity), they affirm that the absolute is relatable (without thereby relativizing it). They proclaim, through their very differentiation and repeatability, the fundamental unity of God's absolute acting, i.e., precisely, the absolute event.

The Church, as well, is impossibly hyphenated. She is us. But she is also the absolute institution. Hopefully, it will be clear by now how far this notion is from any superficial triumphalism, bar only the triumphalism of the Cross. The Church is absolute because she is the "body" of Christ, i.e., the specific sacramental embodiment of his personal will. His personal Incarnation continues in the sacramental Church as a profound cultural incarnation. The redemption as absolute event does not only touch us across the centuries as a single moment, though that undoubtedly it was. Jesus is the absolute subject who touches each of us individually through the sacramental reality of the Church, and this makes every intervention of the Church, every institutional moment, every sacramental enactment an absolute event as well.

We have seen (3b) how sin may be viewed as ontological diminution, and, further (3c), how Jesus' potential yielding to temptation would have been an ontological catastrophe—a moral one as well, but, because of the link between ontology and morality, an ontological one in the first place. In Schindler's terms, there is a profound and fundamental convertibility of the order of being and the order of sacramental presence. Redemption offers being as much as it offers salvation. Redemption is channeled through the cultural vehicle that we perceive as sacramentality. Hence sacramentality affects all, sacramentality is the constant manifestation of the absolute event. The old adage *Extra Ecclesiam nulla salus* can be boldly rephrased as *Extra Ecclesiam nullum ens*, which we can in turn paraphrase as "outside the Church there is no presence."

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