

## Participating in the Shape of a Fully Embodied Life: Community, Presider and Mystery Arriving Together

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Since we are meant to enjoy that truth which is unchangeably alive, and since it is in its light that God the Trinity, author and maker of the universe, provides for all things he has made, our minds have to be purified, to enable them to perceive that light, and to cling to it once perceived ... Of this we would be quite incapable, unless Wisdom herself had seen fit to adapt herself even to such infirmity as ours ... So since she herself is our home, she also made herself for us into the way home ... So it was not by locomotion through space that she is said to have come to us, but by appearing to mortals in mortal flesh. So she came to a place where she already was, because she was in the world, and the world was made through her ... So why did she come, when she was already here, if not because it was God's pleasure through the folly of preaching to save those who believe? How did she come, if not by the Word becoming flesh and dwelling amongst us? It is something like when we talk; ... the word which we have in our thoughts becomes a sound, and is called speech. And yet this does not mean that our thought is turned into that sound, but while remaining undiminished in itself, it takes on the form of spoken utterance ...<sup>1</sup>

Your mystery is laid on the Table of the Lord, your mystery you receive ... Be what you see, and receive what you are.<sup>2</sup>

Taking my cue from Augustine, I want to say this: *in the Eucharist, both we and God come to a place where we already are*. Similarly, in my speaking (or in this case writing), my thought (and feeling) comes to a place where it already was: it gets *repeated differently*.<sup>3</sup> But what happens in the Eucharist is what happens, in some way, everywhere, though it never happens in exactly the same way. Lady Wisdom and creation *really arrive together*, though they were *never really separate*.

Alternately put, the place where we come from, where we already are, where we arrive, and where we are going is not so much a place as a practice or, better, a "happening": *participating in the shape of a fully embodied life, offered, blessed, broken and delivered to enliven every other life*.<sup>4</sup> We find we have been participating all along, however "dysfunctionally," and now we are drawn to an unendingly fuller, more wholesome participation that leads us well beyond the parish walls. This, we can't help believing, is the desired shape of all life everywhere, even though we don't know more

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<sup>1</sup> Augustine, *Teaching Christianity: De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. by Edmund Hill, O. P. (Hyde Park, NY: New City Press, 1996), I.10.10-I.12-13 (pp. 110-111), emphasis added.

<sup>2</sup> Augustine, *Sermon 272*, trans. Darwell Stone, in James F. White, *Documents of Christian Worship* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1992), p. 192.

<sup>3</sup> Augustine does not really address (in this passage) how *my* speech makes my thought present *to me*. But it fits what he says in the rest of the passage. "Non-identical repetition" is a crucial concept among the radically orthodox. See John Milbank, "Can a Gift Be Given?," *Modern Theology* 11:1 (1995):150.

<sup>4</sup> For "shape" one can also substitute "pattern," "rhythm," "drama," "story," "liturgy," etc. This is also the starting point for any worthwhile theology. As Rowan Williams maintains, the "true basis of dogma" is "our 'dramatic' being caught up into the paschal parable, brought to nothing and brought to life." Rowan Williams, *On Christian Theology* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2000), p. 89.

than a mere broken fragment, a “fraction,” of the whole story. And we’ll be more honest about what we don’t know by celebrating what we nevertheless taste and see in the rhythm of taking, blessing, breaking and giving.<sup>5</sup> That at least is the wager that brings me and my vocation to life.

These days my vocation has led me to seek ordination to the priesthood in the Episcopal Church. A crucial thing that priests do, that academic theologians don’t always do, is preside at the Eucharist. So it’s also crucial to reflect on what presiding in the Eucharist involves in a way that does justice to “participating in the shape of a fully embodied life.”

The presider is no magician, nor is the community of faith, because the real presence we adore (in any number of ways) is never absent, and more importantly, never controlled by any of us. So we need to be careful about what our celebrations seem to convey. Do our acts of reverence convey the idea of a God who hadn’t shown up till invoked by the proper formula? Do they look magical? Do they make the presider seem more crucial than the rest of the community? The rubrics in many Eucharist-centered communities make it all too easy for us to convey that message, and we need to keep trying out ways to counter that tendency.

On the other hand, we don’t want to convey that there is nothing extraordinary going on here. What we are surrounded and upheld by at every moment, the shape of a fully embodied life, remains a mystery beyond our fathoming. Many of us find our way to more “catholic” expressions of Christianity precisely because we found no clear acknowledgement of that mystery in other traditions.<sup>6</sup> And our hunger for mystery is so great that we find ourselves practically driven to flirt with idolatry.

So the trick in every case is to balance between the twin temptations of idolatry and banality. By yielding to either temptation, the mystery vanishes. That’s not easy to resist. In fact, I suspect that every parish will have people who find (or yield to) too much of one or the other, no matter how carefully we craft our worship.

After all, everything we do conveys multiple messages. Even the contexts in which we do them are multiple and overlapping. People bring different associations from their pasts that cause them to see different things. I grew up in such an anti-sacramental tradition that there is hardly any danger of me viewing any rite in magical terms. Instead I crave constant reminders that something real and utterly mysterious is happening. So I gravitate toward the lavish and extravagant.

My parish likes to repeat the refrain, “If we can sing it, it will be sung, and if we can do it, it will be done.” For me, that works, but for others it may not. Unlike many, I was never warned as a child about the dangers of dropping consecrated bread on the floor. I never worried that God might zap me if I forgot to genuflect. As an adult theologian I’ve known so many ministers, and been so unimpressed by most, that I’m not

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<sup>5</sup> This is of course an allusion to what many now see as the “four-action” shape of the Eucharist. See Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Continuum, 2001 [1945]), pp.48ff.

<sup>6</sup> I think many worship leaders in most Christian communities are trying to acknowledge mystery in their worship. They may be reaching some. But others of us find ourselves tone-deaf to the idioms they use.

likely to overlook the common humanity that any priest or bishop shares with everybody else. Others will be recovering from those excesses, or others, and will be put off by the very things that appeal to me. Or maybe they will all too obligingly continue to be infantilized by the clericalism they see.

As an eventual presider in the liturgy, it will always be my calling to be a catalyst for the community's common worship. That requires initiative and responsibility on my part. But I need to worship too when I'm presiding, and I need to have visible signs that I'm not alone. Both I and my community need signs that none of us controls grace. We need to see the presence of God happening in our mutual interaction, not just through one or the other of us in isolation. So I am all for encouraging any kind of lay participation that preserves the mystery from idolatry and banality. Anything that can emphasize that all the people of God participate fully in consecration ought to be welcome.

As an eventual presider it will also be my task to make our worship interpermeable with the surrounding world. The fourfold shape of the liturgy doesn't belong to us as private property but exists to break open our self-enclosed worlds to enliven every other life as well, to bring every life to full embodiment in its own distinctiveness. This does not mean making Christians out of everybody else, not even "anonymous Christians." But it does mean making a wholesome difference to anybody whose life intersects with ours, encouraging everyone to participate, in ways we can never control, in the shape of a fully embodied life.<sup>7</sup>

Where does ordination fit in here, specifically ordination in "the historic episcopate"? It does not confer magical powers. Like bread and wine and water in their liturgical contexts, which includes the believing community, the successive laying on of hands in its own liturgical context, stretching back to the community's formative years, is another sign that brings us and God to a place where we already are. It makes a difference, and there's no more reason to abandon it than there would be to abandon Baptism and the Eucharist. That doesn't render invalid any Eucharistic celebration in communities that have not retained this sign, but I find its abandonment to be an unnecessary impoverishment.

For those of us who have retained this sign, the challenge is to find ways to convey that this is another way to reflect the mystery of the whole people of God embodying God's very life. As an eventual presider I am who I am only because my community's supporting hands enact the supporting hands of God.<sup>8</sup> I'll reflect their mystery to them as they reflect mine to me, and in so doing the mystery of God-with-us is

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<sup>7</sup> I am again indebted to Rowan Williams for this conception of the church's mission. "The *Christian* goal in inter-faith encounter is to invite the world of faiths to find here, in the narrative and practice of Jesus and his community, that which anchors and connects their human hopefulness—not necessarily in the form of 'fulfilling their aspirations' or 'perfecting their highest ideals', but as something which might unify a whole diverse range of struggles for human integrity without denying or 'colonizing' their own history and expression." Williams, p. 175

<sup>8</sup> See George Herbert's poem, "The Priesthood," in John N. Wall, Jr, ed., *George Herbert: The Country Parson, The Temple* (New York: Paulist Press, 1981), p. 286: "When God vouchsafeth to become our fare, / Their hands convey him, who conveys their hands."

reflected in and to all of us. It's the shape of a fully embodied life, offered, blessed, broken and delivered to enliven every other life.