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In his poem “Manifesto: The Mad Farmer’s Liberation Front,” Wendell Berry exhorts his readers to live fully in the world: in its joys and sadness, its finitude and transcendence. His exhortations are simple enough. Love the Lord and the world. Plant sequoias. Extend love and acceptance to those who do not deserve it. His poem ends with a final powerful command: Practice resurrection.

As this third issue of Obsculta goes to print we have just entered into the Easter season. Spring is breaking here in Central Minnesota, and with our contemplation of Christ’s triumph over death as well as the arrival of the first spring flowers, resurrection and renewal have been on our minds. These themes have also been at the forefront of the theology at the School of Theology·Seminary. As a community, we have struggled to come to terms with our roles as lay and ordained theologians in our shifting, beautiful traditions. All of our communities are struggling to redefine themselves in the world, and as responsible members of those communities, we must learn to reinterpret our roles as well. It is a time of both great growth and great challenge. On occasion, it can be difficult to remain hopeful in the face of so many changing paradigms.

In these times of change and challenge, the theology done by our peers reveals itself as a kind of grace. Brendan McInerney’s poignant essay on death as the last enemy to be overcome or Corein Brown’s stirring reflection on spiritual gifts and giftedness are just two of the examples of this fine theological work that we are pleased to present to you in this journal. The work that the School of Theology·Seminary faculty, staff, students, and alums are doing is vital and necessary to the renewal, rebirth, and, indeed, resurrection of our faith communities. As editors, we are deeply privileged to be a part of that work.

Kathleen, we admire and are deeply grateful for your continued guidance in this journal’s publication. Thank you for your dedication.

Lauren, your vision made this journal a possibility. Your hard work and dedication to it continue to make it a reality.

SOT·Sem faculty, staff, and students, your theology and passion remind us that renewal and resurrection are possible within our beautiful and complicated work. Thank you for allowing us to be part of your work.

Peace,

Kelly Marie Prosen
Eric Christensen
Jason Ziegler

Eric Christensen, Kelly Prosen, Jason Ziegler
He comes to us as one unknown,  
A breath unseen, unheard…  

Timothy Dudley-Smith

There was a tiny whispering sound. When Elijah heard this, he hid his face in his cloak and stood at the entrance to the cave.  
1 Kings 19: 12b-13a

There was one time that I was sure I was in the presence of God.  
I was an altar server at Mass, sitting reverently in a tall wooden chair in the sanctuary and wearing a heavy alb. Out of nowhere, I was startled by a wonderfully refreshing breeze. It was so cool, I could almost drink it. It felt so soothing, I was sure that it had to be the Holy Spirit. I started to get excited. I almost burst into song: “Surely the presence of the Lord is in this place…” In the middle of my reverie, the priest leaned over to me and whispered, “Someone left the back door open and it’s causing a draft. Go close it, please.”  

I feel blessed to even be able to share this story with people who will understand. I have friends – perhaps you do, too? – that were I to tell them, “I talked with God today,” they’d shake their heads and say, “Riiiiiiight…sure you were.” They wouldn’t believe me without proof.  

I’ve always been jealous of the people in the Old Testament. For them, God is so real, so tangible. I’m especially jealous of Gideon, who seemed to get all the signs he wanted from God. “If the fleece is wet and the ground is dry…” “If the fleece is dry but the ground is wet…” Gideon got clear and certain answers to his questions.2 Whereas for me, God seems to dwell hidden in subtleties. Or, to quote a music professor of mine, “The Deus is in the details.”  

I really wish there was a surefire way to practice listening for God. As a music major, I spent a fair bit of time doing ear training. These days, this means you go to a computer, play a sound file, and then try to write down the notes or rhythms that you hear. You have to get a sense of how much higher or lower one note is from the note before it. For a lot of beginning music students, this feels impossible. It’s a whole new way to listen – it’s not a muscle that you can flex and just “listen harder.” Someone told me once that it’s like having no sense of colors, and then having to distinguish various shades of green and blue. The only consolation is that you get the answers in the end. You know what you were supposed to hear – which doesn’t seem to happen with God.  

I’m reminded of another exercise that I had for a music class. The assignment was to sit alone in a quiet place for thirty minutes, and just listen to see what you can hear. I went to a chapel on campus, one which was usually open but which few people visited. I sat and listened intently. After I got used to the quiet, I could hear my own heart beating and my own breath. The building creaked as it settled in the evening coolness. The wind rustled leaves outside. A few blocks away, a bus pulled up to a stop, and there was a hiss of air as the doors opened. I could even hear the hum of the single electric light in this chapel. Once I started listening, there was a whole new creation out there to hear. I suspect the voice of God is like this new creation. It’s going on constantly – you just have to listen for it. You have to have that power of concentration, like Elijah had, to cut through the noise in the world.  

And that’s one reason we’re all here at the School of Theology·Seminary. We’ve come because we hope to hear more clearly. In our noisy world, the voices I hear most loudly say things like “It’s all about you – and only you.” They say things like “Blessed are the powerful, the rich, and the famous.” They say, “One person can’t change anything. Don’t even try.” It can be hard to hear the soft, whispery voice of God through this din. But God speaks now, just as at Mount Horeb. God’s power is manifest here in Collegeville just as much as in the world – maybe not through earthquakes and winds, but perhaps through snowstorms and loons instead.  

We come to Saint John’s because it is a place more conducive to this kind of listening. Here we have some expert “ear-trainers” to guide us. Spiritual directors abound and are ready to help. And our

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1 Lyrics from the refrain of “Surely the Presence of the Lord” © 1977 by the composer, Lanny Wolfe.
2 Judges 6:36-40.
gracious monastic hosts model for us this listening, guided by a Rule that begins with the word “Listen.” I suspect that Elijah was listening with the “ear of his heart” (though he would have been centuries too early to have known that expression.)

However, it’s not enough to just listen to the word of God. We must act on it as well. Like Elijah, we have a tough job ahead of us. It’s more than just a whole lot of reading and too many papers – although that may be part of it for now. But the papers and the work aren’t the end in themselves. God’s soft whisper calls us to be prophets. God has plans for us, as God did for Elijah and Elisha. Like Elijah, we must be ready to die to self. Like Elisha, who boiled his oxen, we must be willing to leave behind a comfortable way of life that we know and follow a God who calls us somewhere we can only imagine.

I wish I could tell you that after a year here I’ve become an expert in listening for God. There are days I feel like I’m making progress… and days where I feel like I’m a beginning music student again, struggling to make sense of anything that I’m hearing. I do, however, take consolation in the fact that I have you all here to listen with me and to encourage me. I’m still trying to listen intently to figure out what exactly God wants me to do in my life. Please pray for me, as I pray for you, that you may hear what God is calling you to do in yours.

“The Face of Jesus”
Photographed by Ahran Huh
Christ told his followers in the Great Commission, found at the end of Matthew’s Gospel, to, “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you” (28:19-20). As European countries sought imperial expansion during the 15th-17th centuries, Christian missionaries, armed with this charge of Christ, sought to bring the Gospel to the world by joining the expeditions. Wherever they landed, Christian missionaries of Europe were faced with the difficult task of bringing the message of Jesus Christ to cultures that they knew nothing about. Often, these cultures approached religion and morality from an entirely different perspective than their European visitors. One example of such a diverse encounter was the kingdom of China. Starting with Francis Xavier, Jesuit missionaries adopted new techniques to try to spread Christianity throughout China and the rest of Asia. One of the most famous missionaries to China was the Jesuit priest, Matteo Ricci. The purpose of this paper is to present the Jesuit’s method of evangelization, fully embodied in Matteo Ricci, and then to explore its possible impacts on evangelization and missionary work today.

Asian Christianity can be dated back all the way to the Apostle Thomas. Indeed, when Portuguese explorers arrived in India, they found the tomb of St. Thomas, venerated by “heretics” – Nestorian Christians who were already present in Asia. There is also evidence that there were Christians in China at least 8 centuries before the arrival of the Portuguese Jesuits. However, by the 17th century, these early Christians had all but died out.

Though the Portuguese had already made trade contact with China, the Jesuit priest St. Francis Xavier is usually attributed with trying to establish the first Jesuit missionaries in China. In his Journals, Ricci, tells us that, “Xavier was the first of the Society of Jesus to realize the aptitude of the innumerable people of this vast empire for absorbing the truth of the Gospel, as he was also the first to entertain the hope of spreading the faith among them.” Xavier directed most of his early attention on the Japanese. However, as Ricci says, “whenever they were hard pressed in an argument, they always had recourse to the authority of the Chinese…they commonly asserted, that if the Christian religion was really the one true religion, it surely would have been known to the intelligent Chinese and accepted by them.” He decided then that if he were to convert the Japanese, he would first need to convert the Chinese.

The first hurdle Xavier had to overcome was the fact that foreigners were forbidden to enter China except for officially appointed legates. He hoped to return to India and arrange for the Viceroy and Bishop of Goa to send an embassy to the Royal Court. If he could join this embassy, he planned to “announce the Gospel to the Chinese; publicly if allowed to and secretly if not.” However, his plan did not go through, and given that both foreigners and the locals who sponsored their trips into China were punished if caught, Xavier had a difficult time finding help into the Chinese kingdom. Xavier would eventually pour the rest of his life into this project, dying after 11 years of missionary work in the Orient on 2 Dec. 1552, with “his last prayer still absorbed in contemplating the conversion of [the] China” in which he never set foot.

Trigault tells us that, “any attempt to win [the Chinese] over was sheer waste of time, like trying to whiten an Ethiopian.” That did not stop Xavier...
from trying, nor did it stop his successor, a man of equal passion by the name of Alexander Valignano, who set up base at the Portuguese port of Macao in 1578. Father Valignano was eventually joined by two Italian priests, Michele Ruggeri and Matteo Ricci.

Ricci was born just short of two months before Xavier died, on 16 Oct. 1552, in Macerata, Italy. His early schooling was by the Jesuits, and later he was sent to Rome at the age of seventeen by his father to study law. While studying at the prestigious Collegium Romanum, he studied under the great scientist Christopher Clavius, and was well versed in mathematics and a variety of the natural sciences, including astronomy and cartography. However, he soon abandoned his legal studies for religious pursuits. He joined the Society of Jesus on 15 Aug. 1577. He left Portugal and arrived in Goa, India, in 1578 and arrived at the Portuguese colony of Macao in April 1582, about three years after Ruggeri.

Valignano decided quickly that if his missionaries were going to have any success in China, they would have to master the Chinese language, something no other missionaries had done. He maintained Xavier's stance that the most appropriate way to preach the Gospel to the Chinese was through literary and scholarly means and adopted a missionary approach that broke significantly from the conquistador method. Valignano desired to gain converts through “his principles of adaptation, equality, and friendship with the governing class.” This accommodation style of missionary practice was to prove fundamental to success in China.

Ruggeri and Ricci immersed themselves in the Chinese language and culture. Ruggeri was fundamental in helping to establish relations with the Chinese early on, but after they established a mission house in Chaoking in September 1583, Ricci became the primary leader for the Jesuits' Chinese mission.

Simply getting access into China was a task in and of itself. The next step was trying to bring Christianity to the Chinese people. Though, as mentioned above, there were already traces of Christianity, along with Islam and even Judaism, within China, the Chinese had three other religions that dominated their culture: Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism. Ricci viewed the Buddhists as the priestly class of China, and in an effort to become a part of it, he shaved his head and beard, and donned the dress of a Buddhist monk.

In the very beginning, Ricci gained audiences with the intellectuals and authorities primarily through the presentation of gifts of scientific instruments and knowledge from Europe. These consisted of clocks, maps, mathematics, and astronomy. Ricci produced the first map for the Chinese that provided them with a perspective of how their country sat in relation to the rest of the world. When he finished it, he presented it to the prefect of Chaoching along with a clock he had made locally, and the prefect was so pleased he had the map printed and distributed the copies amongst his friends.

It was through the gifts and teaching of these sciences that the missionaries first gained the trust of the Chinese. Again, referring to Ricci's journals: “In order that the appearance of a new religion might not arouse suspicion among the Chinese people, the Fathers did not speak openly about religious matters when they began to appear in public.” Early on, when not meeting with officials, their primary tasks were to continue to study the Chinese culture and language.


12 Ibid., 11.


14 Ibid., 305.

15 Ibid., 306.
Ricci eventually discovered that the best way to enter into dialogue with the Chinese was not as a Buddhist monk, a class looked down upon by government officials and prominent people. The class with the most influence was the Confucian literati, and it was not long before Ricci studied their philosophy thoroughly and gained appreciation for the ethical values regarding the state and the family that are at the heart of Confucianism, believing it to be more similar to Christianity. “In his study of the Analects,” Peter Chung tells us, “Ricci became convinced that Confucius had taught about a reverence for Heaven, apart from idolatry. Along with reverencing Heaven, Confucius also articulated an emphasis on human ethical morality, which is inherently good.” Ricci also viewed Confucianism as a “perfect expression of natural law.”

The Chinese were quite literate, particularly the Confucian officials Ricci was associating with. In order to make a lasting impact on the Chinese, Ricci and his colleges determined that they would have to utilize publications. Their first year in China, they went to work translating the Ten Commandments. This was so well received, that pamphlets containing the Lord’s Prayer, the Hail Mary, and the Creed soon followed.

One of Ricci’s first tasks was to decide how to translate the Christian understanding of “God” for the Chinese. Confucianism provided Ricci an excellent source. In early Confucian writings, the word Shang-ti is often used as a term for deity, and is often translated as “Lord on High,” or “Sovereign on High.” There is the possibility that this referred to an ancestor or a group of ancestors, underneath which were lesser spirits or gods that typically corresponded to elements such as the sun, moon, wind, rain, mountains or rivers. A change in dynasty introduced a new term, T’ien, that translates to “Heaven,” and was used interchangeably with Shang-ti.

One of Ricci’s greatest writings was The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven. A primary focus of Confucianism was the task of self-improvement of an individual’s moral character over the course of one’s lifetime. Ricci focused extensively in the True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven “from beginning to end…to expound the nature of self-cultivation.” The work is written as a dialogue between a Chinese scholar and a Western scholar, and Ricci was able to connect Confucian principles with Christian ones. One example of this is filial piety, “the most treasured cultural value of the Chinese people,” which he connected to the relationship between humankind and the Lord of Heaven. Section 115 states:

Our parents give us the various parts of our bodies, and we ought, therefore, to be filial towards them. Our sovereign and his ministers give us land, places to live, trees and animals so that we can practice filial piety towards our elders, and instruct and nurture our children. We ought therefore to honor them as well. But how much more should we honor the Lord of Heaven who is the great Father and Mother, the great Sovereign, the first Cause of all first ancestors, the One from whom all sovereigns derive their mandate and the Producer and Sustainer of all things.

There were complications for using both terms. Shang-ti was adopted by Taoism, which both Ricci and the Confucians both spoke strongly against; and T’ien fell short of adequately expressing the Christian God. The term decided upon was T’ien-chu, which translated means “Lord of Heaven.” Though a term that refers to a deity in Buddhist writings, the missionaries adopted this term freely and it remains the official term for God in the Catholic Church in China today. In his writings, however, Ricci often used both of the traditional Chinese terms for God, as well as the new T’ien-chu.

Ibid., 7.  
Ibid.  
Ibid., 33.  
Ibid.  
Ibid., 34.
each person possesses can be transferred to honoring God for all these and more.

Ricci also connected the Confucian understanding of humanity to the Christian notion of love. He says that humanity is the most important of virtues, and explains humanity as fulfilling Christ’s commandments: “The definition of humanity can be summed up in the following two sentences: Love the Lord of Heaven, for He is supreme; and love others as you love yourself for the sake of the Lord of Heaven.”

In looking at these connections Ricci made, we can see that Ricci essentially saw Confucianism as a pathway to Christianity, and he was successful in bringing the Chinese to viewing Christianity as providing a new component to their Confucian faith. Chung-Yan Joyce Chan, in exploring Ricci’s success in China, proposes that:

the unique message of Christianity embedded in the belief of the existence of a Supreme God of the Universe, skillfully presented by Ricci in a culturally acceptable style, perfected the teaching of classical Confucianism... Ricci’s message introduced the literati to transcendent help that goes beyond human limitations and weaknesses in the pursuit of moral ideals. Chung shows us the relation between Confucianism and Christianity that Ricci brought to light. In much the same way as the patristic fathers viewed Greek philosophy as laying a foundation that allowed the Greco-Roman culture of the time to accept Christianity, Confucianism laid a similar foundation in China.

Ricci’s efforts at bridging a gap between Confucianism and Christianity, between Chinese and European cultures, were very successful. However, it did not happen without criticisms both back home and also abroad. For one, Ricci was forced to “make some revision of Catholic doctrines to accommodate some of the Confucian ideas, in order to reach concordance with Confucian thought.”

According to Chung, there were two primary points of contention: first, in regards to his practice, Ricci “was accused of paying too much attention to the Confucian elite instead of pushing the missionary cause forward”; in regards to his theory, he was accused of “sullying the purity of Christianity” by integrating it with Confucianism. Other criticisms come from Michael Loewe, who says:

The grand strategy of the Jesuit missionaries was not successful, despite some notable cases of conversion and the considerable contribution that they made to Chinese culture. The failure was due mainly to irreconcilable differences of intellectual outlook and to the inherent dangers of the tactics that were adopted... By their tactics of accommodation, their tolerance of Chinese rites, and their deliberate search for evidence of Christian principles in traditional pre-Christian texts, the Jesuits may well have made a grave long term error.

In regards to converts, Lowe later says, “Some of the conversions that the fathers achieved [were] undoubtedly sincere; the validity of some must remain open to question.” According to Lowe, it is because of the strategy of accommodation – which some would argue was the primary reason for Ricci's success – the validity of some of the conversions amongst the Chinese is suspect.

Another criticism of Ricci, from a modern perspective, comes from Douglas Lancashire and Peter Hu Kuo-chen, S.J., who, in their translator’s introduction to The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven, say that “Ricci did not really grasp the central ideas of the various Chinese schools of thought of his day, or their historical background.” This was particularly evident in his treatment of Buddhism and Taoism, both of which Lancashire and Kuo-chen claim can be understood by Christians “as similar to those of... the negative approach to God in scholastic philosophy and theology.” There is also evidence that

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36 Chung, Paul S. “Mission and Inculturation in the Thought of Matteo Ricci.” In Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium, 314.
37 Ricci, Matteo. The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i), 375.
39 Ibid.
40 Introduction to Ricci, Matteo. The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i), 9.
41 Chung, Paul S. “Mission and Inculturation in the Thought of Matteo Ricci.” In Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium, 316.
42 Ibid.
43 Ibid., 317.
45 Ibid., 205.
46 Introduction to Ricci, Matteo. The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T'ien-chu Shih-i), 47.
47 Ibid.
he misunderstood the Confucian intellectuals’ views on the motivation of good conduct, as well as the Buddhist views of reincarnation.48

Finally, Ricci is often critiqued, fairly or unfairly, for his Western European scholastic bias in theology, especially in regards to his dismissal of the other religions of Buddhism and Taoism.49 Chung is particularly critical of Ricci’s theological bias:

If Ricci believed that God revealed Godself through the name of T’ien or Shang-ti in ancient Chinese culture, should he not have taken more seriously God’s universal reign for all, rather than sorting out wisdom and natural reason in Chinese classics as the independent points of connection for consonance with God? Instead of rationalizing Chinese Confucian philosophy as independent natural revelation, should he not have deemed such wisdom (together with Buddhism and Taoism!), more dynamically, as analogical witnesses to God in light of God’s reconciliation in Jesus Christ with the world? Ricci’s understanding of Jesus Christ reveals a dysfunctional view of mission, so that his attempt at accommodation centers only on theism in Christian-Confucian relations [cites Hans Kung, Does God Exist?: An Answer for Today (Garden City, NY: Double-day, 1980) 513 – 515].50

While it is important to recognize his missionary shortcomings, it would be wrong to let them significantly undermine Ricci’s successes. Chung says that, “Ricci’s legacy will remain a springboard for his followers to improve upon his limitations in terms of engaging the wisdom of other religions.”51 Even if he failed, from a 21st century perspective, in his “view of mission,” Ricci was important in bridging European and Chinese cultures. Lowe admits that one of the positives to come from Ricci and the other Jesuits’ work was that it brought Chinese culture to mainstream Europe.52

Ricci’s demonstration of the compatibility between the Chinese concepts of T’ien, “Heaven,” and Shang-ti, “Sovereign on High,” and the Christian understanding of God is highly praised.53 Lancashire and Kuo-chern even go so far as to say, “This demonstration is the greatest merit of The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven and Ricci’s most important contribution to the Chinese-Christian dialogue. His spirit is that which should animate those who wish to create a Chinese Christian theology.”54

In response to the issue of sincerity in regards to the Confucian literati’s conversions, Chan points out that association with foreigners in sixteenth century China was a dangerous thing that could even carry with it the charge of treason.55 “Why,” she asks, “would someone who held a high position in the imperial court risk their future and the lives of their loved ones for some strangers?”56 Chan also mentions that associated with conversion was behavioral changes amongst the literati who adopted Christianity.57 Acknowledging a change in faith is one thing, but one’s actions are often much more indicative of a true change, and Ricci’s Christianity seemed to inspire that change.

In judging Ricci’s success, one must also acknowledge the environment in which he worked. According to Chan, “The chaotic Chinese political situation created urgency for reform, which opened tremendous opportunity for new ideas.”58 But the job of introducing the Chinese to Christianity still required the right man, and Ricci was that man. Practicing what Chung calls a “model of evangelism, based on friendship,”59 Ricci went to great pains to identify himself with the Chinese people, and they acknowledged the kindness and respect with which he approached his missionary work. Titles such as, “Blue-eyed and with a voice like melodious bell,” and “Doctor from the Great West,” as he was referred to by the Chinese, show the respect and admiration the Chinese people had for Ricci.

Ricci’s efforts got him access into the Imperial city of Peking in 1598, and later in 1601 he was granted residence there.60 He presented gifts to the

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48 Ibid, 47-49.
49 Ibid, 49.
50 Chung, Paul S. “Mission and Inculturation in the Thought of Matteo Ricci.” In Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium, 325.
51 Ibid, 324.
52 Loewe, Michael. “Imperial China’s Reactions to the Catholic Missions.” Namen, 205.
53 Introduction to Ricci, Matteo. The True Meaning of the Lord of Heaven (T’ien-chu Shih-i), 52.
54 Ibid.
56 Ibid.
57 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
60 Rouleau, F.A. Ricci, Matteo, in New Catholic Encyclopedia, 471.
Emperor, but Ricci never met the Emperor face to face. On 11 May 1610, Ricci died and was buried just outside of Peking on land that was designated by the Emperor for such purposes and for a new mission house for the Jesuit missionaries. The land also received imperial consecration. F. A. Rouleau reports that, “Known throughout the realm as Li Mat’ou, this missionary scholar form the West became and has ever remained the most respected foreign figure in Chinese literature.” Known not only as “an eminent teacher of the Christian religion,” but also as a “prominent professor of physics, mathematics and geography, as a learned philosopher of Chinese and of extraneous doctrine, and as a prominent commentator on Confucius…Some of his Chinese compositions, which he accomplished alone…are included in the official index of the best Chinese writings of all time.”

After his death, the mission continued on, but conflict began to arise regarding Ricci and his fellow Jesuits’ accommodation techniques. The Chinese got along well with their Jesuit friends, but they clashed starkly with the institutional church. Papal decrees came out in 1704 from Pope Clement XI and later in 1742 by Pope Benedict XIV. They first banned T’ien and Shang-ti as designations for God, and instructed Chinese Catholics not to follow “traditional Chinese rites that did not conform to Catholicism…offering sacrifices to Confucius, as well as to ancestors, was declared idolatry and superstition; Confucius himself was denounced as a public idolater and a private atheist.” The second decree fully condemned the Chinese rite, “and opposed the Jesuits’ mission of acculturation definitively.”

In many ways, this was a moot point, as the edict of toleration of Christianity issued by the Emperor in 1692 was revoked in 1724, banning Christianity from the country. It was not until 1939 that Pope Pius XII overturned the decree of 1724, allowing Chinese Christians to practice Chinese rites.

Despite the criticisms and the struggles between the Chinese authorities and Church authorities, Ricci “was successful in opening the doors of China to Christianity.” His concern for a foreign culture as a missionary practice was not a new concept (Gregory the Great implored his missionary Augustine to keep what was good of the Anglo-Saxon culture), and the strategy of accommodation was not solely his plan for China. However, Ricci’s approach to both can be an example for today’s missionaries. Ricci completely immersed himself in the Chinese culture, and demonstrated a genuine respect for the culture and people of China. Even in his criticisms of religions such as Buddhism or Taoism, Piero Corradini says he “never showed any contempt for the doctrines he was refuting. For this reason, he was highly appreciated even by his adversaries.”

It is often said that actions speak louder than words. Just as a changed behavior on behalf of converted Chinese literati could be used to indicate a genuine conversion, it would seem that Ricci’s actions truly supported the Gospel he preached. Though all people should witness to their faith in this way, it would seem this is especially the case for missionaries. This, combined with the fact that Ricci not only translated Christianity into the Chinese language, but into the Chinese philosophical and religious languages as well, no doubt demonstrated to the Chinese people his commitment to them. Their response was that a growing number converted to the faith Ricci preached. At the time of Ricci’s death, about 2,500 Chinese had converted. In 1700, there were upwards of 200,000 Catholics in China. Today, there are approximately 8 million Catholics in China loyal to Rome, due in large part to the efforts of Ricci and the other Jesuit missionaries, and those that followed after. Corradini has it right in saying of Ricci, “He was a forerunner of our times, and the present dialogue between western and Chinese scholars is a clear demonstration that Ricci’s approach to China was the correct one.”
God-talk
(Benedictine)
by Bernadette Dodge

In the rock tumbler
where my mind clatters,
chips,
and cracks
against my heart, I find you listening.

I hear you
in the clinking,
tumbling,
swirling
of broken pieces and newly polished sight.

There is a silence
within your speaking
that I want to fall
into.

Like breath
it is without
force:
receiving,
emanating.
The debate between Walter Kasper and Joseph Ratzinger concerning the universal church’s relationship to the local churches has been called by many the most important ecclesiological issue of this generation. Their debate has spanned almost a decade and has been continued by theologians seeking to understand the issue as well as advance one opinion over the other. Joseph Ratzinger argues that in understanding the relationship between these two aspects of church, the local and universal, the universal church must be emphasized over the local churches in order to preserve unity. Kasper disagrees, believing this emphasis will lead to the abstraction of the primary element of the church – if it be universal – and believes both aspects should be valued equally. The purpose of this paper is to seek to understand their debate in a step-by-step manor, while illuminating important points and advancements in the theology. Following this, I will show the opinions of two specific papers, which seek to illuminate the issues of the debate by adding views stemming from other subsets of theology. Finally, it will briefly discuss the implications three trinitarian theologians’ ideas of perichoresis, trinitarian life, and inner unity have on the ecclesiological debate. It is the opinion of this author that placing priority on the universal church removes historical significance from the church as a whole. As Kasper argues, it is the people in a concrete existence, not the abstract church, that are primary to understanding the church along with seeking to maintain inner unity. The three trinitarian theologians chosen for this discussion highlight this point.

One preliminary distinguishing difficulty surrounding this debate is the lack of definition on the part of some theologians of the term ‘universal church.’ This has increased the difficulty of an already nuanced debate. However, following the work of Joseph Ratzinger’s and Walter Kasper’s placement of priority, some have attempted to flesh out the nuances of the term universal Church as used in Lumen Gentium, in “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion,” and in each of the responses by Kasper and Ratzinger in the debate. Paul McPartlan offers two uses of this term in his essay. The first refers to the church as ‘essential mystery,’ which is the Church as “the final heavenly eschatological Church of all ages, the assembly of all the just ‘from Abel...to the last of the elect’ (LG 2).” The second, which McPartlan says is used more regularly by Lumen Gentium, is the universal Church as ‘worldwide community.’ This aspect, he states, is, “the present worldwide Church of today (e.g. LG 25).” This distinction is often blurred by theologians in the debate, and was never clarified in Lumen Gentium. However, the distinction is necessary for discussion of the issue, as will be discussed later in McPartlan’s article concerning eschatology. It is also necessary to establish the weight with which one is using the term ‘universal Church.’ The heart of the debate relies heavily on how this term is defined. These tensions will be drawn out briefly in the summary and the greater discussion of the issue that will follow.

The Ratzinger-Kasper debate was sparked by statements made by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith (CDF) in a clarifying letter, “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion.” The statement in question for Kasper states in paragraph 9, “It is not the result of the communion of the Churches, but, in its essential mystery, it is a reality ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular Church.” Ratzinger, who was head of the CDF at this time, had used this construction before, as shown by Killian McDonnell, in “books published in 1989 and 1991, well before the CDF’s 1992 letter.” Obviously, this is Ratzinger’s formulation.

2 Ibid.
mention of ontological and temporal precedence is supported by reference to the Fathers, saying, “ontology, the Church-mystery, the Church that is one and unique, precedes creation (42), and gives birth to the particular Churches as her daughters. She [the Church] expresses herself in them; she is the mother and not the product of the particular Churches.”

Kasper reacts to this particular statement fearing that the statement is a reversal of the theology found in Lumen Gentium. The particular theology Kasper feels is in danger is found in paragraph 23, stating, “Individual bishops are the visible source and foundation of unity in their own particular churches, which are modeled on the universal church; it is in and from these that the one and unique catholic church exists.” According to McDonnell, Kasper’s criticism focuses on “the response of the CDF to the ecclesiological threats, namely the declaration that the universal Church is ontologically and temporally prior to every individual particular church. Kasper contends that CDF identifies una, sancta, catholica, et apostolica ecclesia with the universal Church in a way that excludes the particular churches.” Kasper’s argument focuses on the possibility that the universal church could become an abstraction; the local churches, which represent the historical reality of the church, could be neglected for the sake of something which has no real bearing on life. McDonnell continues, “The ontological and temporal priority of the universal Church becomes completely problematic when by some secret unspoken assumption (unter der Hand) the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia.” This primarily pastorally based fear of a return to a unity emphasized at the expense of the individual, particular churches in their diversity, as admitted by Kasper later in the debate, is the context with which he ultimately responds to Ratzinger and the CDF’s claims.

Ratzinger’s next response is found in a German publication, Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung. Here Ratzinger responds to Kasper’s concern of centralization on Rome by describing the context with which he is arguing. This is found in the misuse, (and, as Ratzinger contends: overuse) of the formula of churches as communion. He believes that the theology of Church must amount to more than a sociological interpretation of its structures. He contends that this tendency must be reverted to the Church’s primary task. McDonnell presents his argument, “But the discussion becomes skewed when the proper task of the Church is not kept in mind. The task of the Church is not primarily to speak of itself, but of God.” Thus, the possibility to revert ecclesiology into a totally horizontal exercise must be avoided. Ratzinger returns to the follow-up point made in the original letter, that of patristic sources, in order to defend the temporal and ontological priority of the universal church. He also references the day of Pentecost in Acts as the first episode of the universal Church. McDonnell states, “The narrative is a ‘theological declaration’ (theologische Aussage) in the basis of which the CDF notes that the Church begins with the gathering around Mary and the 120, together with the renewed community of the Twelve, who are not members of a local church, but are the apostles who will carry the gospel to the ends of the earth.” He also draws attention to Kasper’s objection presented earlier about the possibility of an unspoken assumption that allows the idea that “the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia.” Ratzinger dismisses this as a hypothetical situation upon which Kasper then bases his argument. Yet, the issue is not completely unrelated. Ratzinger addresses these concerns by moving the conversation into the universal aspects of sacraments.

In analyzing Kasper’s rebuttal, a good place to start is with his treatment of the places of agreement between Ratzinger and himself. Kasper points to three areas where he and Ratzinger agree: (1) the “one-ness” of the church. Here he states, “This ‘one-ness’ is not in a future ideal that we strive to reach through the ecumenical movement: the one church exists in the present. It is not, however, a sum of the ‘fragments of the one church’ – as if at present each church were a mere fragment of the one church.” (2) The relationship between the universal and local churches as stated in Lumen Gentium 23. He states, “The one church of Jesus Christ exists ‘in and from’ the local churches. It exists, therefore, in each local

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5 “Letter to the Bishops of the Catholic Church on Some Aspects of the Church Understood as Communion” cf. Also footnote 5, McDonnell, 229.
7 Ibid., 231.
8 Ibid.
10 Ibid., 234.
11 Ibid., 236.
12 Kasper, 12.
church; it is present there especially in the celebration of the Eucharist... As the universal church consists ‘in and from’ local churches, so each local church exists ‘in and from’ the one church of Jesus Christ.”

Here he emphasizes the mutual relationship between universal and local even if they disagree on the placement of priority (3). The relationship between the universal and local are “intimately united. They share the same existence; they live within each other.”

This reality is based in trinitarian theology as unity is not reducible to uniformity, but itself depends on the diversity of its portions.

Kasper’s acknowledgment of these similarities form a solid ground for further discussion. He first returns to the problem that sparked his first response, that is, to ensure that Ratzinger is not arguing for the return to a Roman-centered church. He bases this necessity on the theology of the local bishop found in Lumen Gentium. He argues, “The local church is neither a province nor a department of the universal church; it is the church at a given place. The local bishop is not the delegate of the pope but is one sent by Jesus Christ. He is given personal responsibility by Christ.” Here, I believe, Kasper responds to Ratzinger’s emphasis on Kasper’s seeming use of a hypothetical situation (“if the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia”) to base an argument by emphasizing that despite the best efforts of theologians, centralization has occurred. Kasper states, “This understanding of the bishop’s office should have led to decentralization in the church’s government. The opposite happened: the trend toward centralization returned after the council.”

He continues, after speculating on the reasons for this return, “Whatever happened, by now such ‘unifying’ activities and processes have gone too far. The right balance between the universal church and the particular churches has been destroyed.” These observances come not only from Kasper’s pastoral experience but from bishops all over the world.

Moving now to his critique of Ratzinger’s tendency to return to a priority of the universal aspect of church, Kasper finds difficulty with this argument in an historical analysis of church development. Here he objects to Ratzinger’s interpretation of the Lukan account of Pentecost, drawing on historical critical interpretations of the narrative. He states that historically, “The early church developed from local communities. Each was presided over by a bishop; the one church of God was present in each. Because the one church was present in each and all, they were in communion.” This is contrary to Ratzinger’s interpretation of the Lukan account which sees the event as the placement of the universal church first, gathered around the apostles and not local churches. Kasper disputes this interpretation directly when he states, “Many exegetes are convinced that the ‘Pentecostal event’ in the Acts of the Apostles is a construction by Luke. Similar ‘Pentecostal events’ also occurred, probably from the beginning, in the communities of Galilee.”

This, Kasper says, is why Ratzinger feels he must root his argument not in historical evidence, but in the Fathers of the Church and their statements of the pre-existence of the church. This pre-existence, as Kasper presents it, was developed in a manner similar to that of the pre-existence of the Torah – as “a heavenly reality before the creation of the world.”

He says that by this doctrine of the the church, St. Paul means to place the church not as an accidental reality but anchored in God and the mystery of God. This, Kasper says, cannot be left out when understanding ecclesiology but does not necessitate the ontological primacy of the universal church.

Finally, what I believe to be at the heart of the conversation and disagreement, is the question, “Does a priority on the universal church run the risk of abstraction?” While the problem of return to a Roman centralism is something to take note of, the possibility of an abstract foundation for the theology of church is much more daunting. If the church were to be conceived primarily on the basis of abstract notions there would be no need for it to include relevance to any social situation. While the socialization of theology cannot be the route to understanding the church, neither can the church be understood without the social aspect that is inherent to its people. It is important to note here that Ratzinger is not advocating for this specifically. This problem is based on the dangers Kasper sees in Ratzinger’s position on the issue. Quoting a common ground for both theologians, Kasper appeals to Henri de Lubac in driving home this point. He states,

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13 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid., 9.
16 Ibid.
17 Ibid., 10.
No less a scholar than Henri de Lubac stated, ‘A universal church which would have a separate existence, or which someone imagined as existing outside the particular churches, is a mere abstraction.’ He explained further: ‘God does not love empty abstractions. He loves concrete human beings of flesh and blood. God’s eternal saving will intended the incarnation of the Logos in view of the concrete church composed of people of flesh and blood.’

McDonnell comments on this point and agrees with Kasper that Ratzinger’s position is one that leads to an interpretation that is not concerned about historical events by saying,

The objection is not to the priority of God’s eternal will to save humanity through a community of salvation, the Church, but to Ratzinger’s assumption that this mystery of the pre-existent Church in God’s eternal will is only the universal church, and not the actual church which exists ‘in and from’ the local churches. If one insists with Ratzinger that the pre-existent Church is only the universal Church apart from the local churches, then one has opted for an ecclesiological abstraction.

This issue is at the heart of the debate.

What makes this issue more difficult, as stated earlier in the paper, is the dual definitions of universal church being used to combat each other. It seems to me that Kasper argues consistently from a ‘worldwide community’ while Ratzinger argues from the definition of universal church as ‘essential mystery’. Neither of these theologians takes the other conception of universal church out of their definition but they, in some cases are not speaking about the same things. In attempting to solve this issue without a clarification of which definition either is talking about at a given point, the conversation is much more difficult to engage.

On the other hand, the conversation benefits from the placement of the term ‘universal church’ as the central focus as opposed to the ‘universal church as worldwide community’ or the ‘universal church as essential mystery’. If these terms were being discussed individually the temptation could be to argue that the ‘worldwide church’ aspect is given to perichoretic relationship of equal priority with the local churches and the ‘essential mystery’ aspect is to be given priority over the local churches. The universal church per se cannot have two separate relationships to the local church. This would contribute to a dualism within an understanding of church which itself should not even be conceived without the local churches. What makes the church of Christ exist in the Catholic Church is the fact the the eschatological church is present now and not just at some future event. Thus, it is the eschatological ‘essential mystery’ that is present in the ‘worldwide community’ that makes it relevant. The interlocution and perichoresis of these two elements makes them indistinguishable except to talk about aspects of the universal church per se and not about two separate entities.

While it is clear that Kasper disagrees with the movement towards abstraction that Ratzinger seems to be taking, he does offer a final way of mutually understanding the underlying premises of both theological starting points. Kasper states, “The conflict is between theological opinions and underlying philosophical assumptions. One side [Ratzinger] proceeds by Plato’s method; its starting point is the primacy of an idea that is a universal concept. The other side [Kasper] follows Aristotle’s approach and sees the universal as existing in a concrete reality.”

Here, Kasper attempts to make acceptable both ways of approaching the issue – Platonic and Aristotelian – in the Catholic tradition as it has been accepted by the Fathers throughout the church’s development. Again, this attempt, I do not think, is saying that the placement of priority is open to either side of the debate but the fundamental philosophical underpinnings are both acceptable.

In Ratzinger’s final response in this debate, he begins with the topic which he has been attacking in Kasper’s position – the hypothetical “if the Roman church is de facto identified with the pope and the curia...” statement. Ratzinger states that he addressed the relationship between the universal church and local churches in a speech where he explained that, “the letter from the congregation never dreamt of identifying the reality of the universal church with the pope and Curia, and hence that the fears voiced by Kasper were groundless.”

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21 Ibid., 13.
22 McDonnell, 241.
that in response to this, Kasper dropped this notion and shifted the argument to the level of Ratzinger’s personal philosophical views away from the CDF. Then, Ratzinger continues to defend his personal viewpoint that the universal church should have priority in ecclesiological understandings.

Ratzinger’s primary argument for the priority of the universal in this rebuttal is the idea that in baptism, one is baptized into the universal, and not the local church community. Ratzinger points to a specific statement that Kasper had made about Kasper’s own baptism. Ratzinger states, “yet in baptism he had not been socialized into this particular community, but born into the one church. As far as I am concerned, this statement clears up the controversy – for that is at issue here.”

For Ratzinger, Kasper’s assertion that a baptism is a baptism into a universal community shows that the sacramental nature of the church places its priority first into the universal church.

Kasper’s final response reasserts his primary argument, as McDonnell states,

the agreement with the formula that ‘local churches and the universal Church are incorporated into and interpenetrate one another, so that one can speak of their being simultaneous.’ This principle is absolutely central to Kasper’s position from which he does not depart. Ratzinger, says Kasper, now grants this perichoretic relationship ‘holds true for the Church as it has existed throughout history’ which means that the local church and universal Church are simultaneous in all concrete historical manifestations.

This perichoresis of the universal church and local churches, as Kasper sees it, cannot exist when one is ontologically and temporally prior. For this reason, in his final response he notes Ratzinger’s reformulation of his thesis into a focus on “[t]he inner priority of unity, of the one bride to her essential variety, seems to be plainly evident.” This, along with Ratzinger’s acceptance of the perichoretic nature of the universal church and local churches, Kasper sees as beneficial, “avoiding as it does ‘the confusing language about the precedence of the universal Church.”

This formulation allows Kasper to agree with the thesis in general, though I suspect that Ratzinger would still contend for the ontological and temporally priority of the universal church.

Kasper responds to this persistent claim as Ratzinger presented it in terms of the sacrament of baptism. McDonnell presents Kasper’s statement, “Both agree that one becomes a member of the Catholic Church through baptism. But one becomes so – as the temporal-spatial event of baptism makes clear – in a specific (episcopally structured) local church. The principle of simultaneity holds true precisely of the sacramental event.”

Kasper continuously refutes Ratzinger’s claims that the universal church holds ontological and temporal priority, contending that the church necessarily exists in a historical context. In this way, Kasper retains that the church can never become an abstraction.

The original claims for priority of the universal church are based on the patristic notion that the church itself is pre-existent. Kasper enthusiastically affirms the pre-existence of the church, stating the necessity of this doctrine for the correct understanding of ecclesiology. Yet, even the presence of the idea of pre-existence does not argue for the priority of the universal church. There are two reasons for this difference. First, Kasper argues for the pre-existence of the whole church, local and universal, and not just one aspect and “therefore denies the ontological priority of the universal Church.” It would seem difficult to argue that the concrete and historical church is pre-existent. However, Kasper is able to do this based on his clarification of the term ‘pre-existent’ in his first article in America. He does this by saying that by pre-existence, St. Paul’s meant that “the church is not the product of accidental historical circumstance, developments and decisions but is grounded in the eternal saving will of God. Its origins lie in the eternal mystery of God who saves. This is precisely what Paul is stressing when in his letters he speaks of the eternal saving mystery of God that was hidden in earlier times but is manifest now in the church and through the church (Eph. 1:3-14; 3:3-12; Col. 1:26 ff.).”

It is in this way that pre-existence “cannot be contested” not in a way that places the church outside of historical and

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25 Ibid., 11.
26 Ibid., 10.
28 Ibid., 246.
29 Ibid., 247.
30 Kasper, 13.
31 Ibid.
concrete existence as literally placing it outside of
time accomplishes.

Second, Ratzinger wants to maintain the
depth of the church, as he would see too much emphasis on the local churches contributing to the
socialization of theology; theology without any ver-
tical dimension. Conversely, Kasper fears that the
abstraction of the church will reach a point at which it
is no longer relevant or connected to the histori-
cal life of the church. He also addresses Ratzinger's
fear of socialization of ecclesiology. McDonnell's
assessment of this situation states, “Kasper denies
such identification and the evacuation of the theological
depth, but asserts that one does not step out of the
local church into the universal Church (or vice versa).
The local church is the Church in a given place. Be-
cause of simultaneity and perichoresis, one is already
in the universal Church when one is in local church.
Simultaneity and perichoresis has everything to do
with the pre-existence of the Church, and with the
denial of the ontological priority.” Ratzinger agrees
with the interpenetration of the local churches and
universal church as it exists in history, but maintains
that the pre-existent church is primary. Thus, as Mc-
Donnell shows, “Even when Ratzinger grants simultaneity, he still insists on sequence: first the universal
Church, then the local.”

With these differences in opinion and philo-
sophical underpinnings we will move on to discuss
how two theologians have attempted to clarify the is-
sue by introducing different theological aspects into
the conversation. First, the perichoresis and inter-
penetration of the church and churches. This theme
obtained from trinitarian theology is integral to un-
derstanding the relationship of the universal church
to the local historical instances of church. Thus, it is
integral to understanding the church’s (churches’) re-
lationship to the world and the relationship to God.
Second, the idea to come out of Ratzinger’s refor-
mulation of his position – that being – ‘the inner
priority of unity.’ In this statement Kasper is able
to agree with Ratzinger that this idea is essential, yet
does so without claiming the universal church to be
above in importance to the local church.

The first opinion, sequentially in our discus-
sion as well as the history of the debate, is the in-
troduction of eschatological understanding of John
Zizioulas by Paul McPartlan. McPartlan contends
that Zizioulas’s perspective, being from the differ-
ing mindset of the east, can shed a new light on this
controversy and help shift perspective of the debate.
After making the distinction between the universal
church as ‘worldwide community’ and ‘essential mys-
tery’ presented earlier in this paper, McPartlan shows
how the eschatological understanding of church is
largely unemployed by the west insofar as a ‘larger’
eschatology would see it. He describes this eschatol-
ogy, “the local church, especially in it Eucharist, is
actually constituted after the model of the eschato-
logical Church and is, indeed, the icon of the final
congregating.”

He then distinguishes between these
two types of eschatology as Zizioulas presents them.
The first is eschatology as orientation, which sees the
eschatological event as the culmination of histori-
cal process. The second, which Zizioulas employs,
sees the eschaton as a present reality that “presup-
poses the end of mission.”

McPartlan then points to Henri de Lubac, whom both Kasper and Ratz-
inger engage to argue their points, as a great pro-
ponent of eschatology as orientation. Kasper and
Ratzinger, McPartlan states, “are both disciples of
this outstanding Western master, and the debate be-
tween them is an intra-Western debate which could,
I respectfully suggest, benefit from a more eschato-
logical Eastern perspective.”

With this, McPartlan begins his analysis of the debate.

McPartlan’s article reviews the debate be-
tween Ratzinger and Kasper. Since we have already
canvased this progression it will serve our purpose
to review McPartlan’s main points and their influ-
ence on these main issues. The view of the eschato-
logical church, presented in the previous paragraph,
serves to prevent over accenting the historical reality
of church by the continual injection of the Eucharist
into the local church. In Zizioulas’s view, it is “precisely the Eucharist that renders all self-sufficiency
on the part of the particular Churches impossible’, and
the CDF’s warning against eucharistic ecclesi-
ology fostering a ‘one-sided emphasis’ on the local
church directly corresponds to Zizioulas’s own criti-
cism of the ‘localism’ of eucharistic ecclesiology’s
pioneer, Nicholas Afanassieff.” In other words, the
nature of the Eucharist as embodying the ‘es-
ential mystery’ of the church outside history, but

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32 McDonnell, 248.
33 Ibid., 247-248.
34 McPartlan, 23.
35 Ibid. cf. Also John Zizioulas, Being as Communion, (London:
36 Ibid., 24.
37 Ibid., 27.
continuously influencing it, stops the local church from claiming the presence of the universal church within itself if it is separate from the other local churches. McPartlan sides with Ratzinger here in terms of the priority of the universal church saying, “A universal primacy would have its place within that eschatological framework. In other words, for Zizioulas, the mutual interiority of the local and worldwide Church [distinguished from the ‘essential mystery’] is based on the mutual interiority of the local and the eschatological Church, as a result of which all local churches ‘coincide’ with one another.”

McPartlan points to the end of the debate to sum up its primary controversy.

This way of envisaging the Church-mystery may well seem rather strange and somewhat at odds with scriptural images of the Church-mystery as one single community (e.g. Heb 12:22-25; Rev. 7:9; 21:2), but how can that oneness be embraced without legitimating the priority of the worldwide Church, as a single community, over the local churches? That is the conundrum at the heart of this debate. Kasper wants to avoid priority, but seems then to need a rather difficult hypothesis. So we must ask: Is there another way? The answer will require a shift from the strongly historical framework within which both Ratzinger and Kasper work into a more eschatological one.

With this framing and a brief summary of his article, McPartlan makes his final argument for introducing Zizioulas’s eschatological framework into the debate, especially in terms of defining the pre-existence of the church. He says that the term itself invites a rather historical interpretation of the issue. However, “Zizioulas would urge that the Church is pre-existent only in the sense that, by the power of the Holy Spirit, its reality, which is truly eschatological,...was already mysteriously operative from the beginning of time.” This allows the distinction between between universal church as ‘worldwide communion’ and as ‘essential mystery’ to remain concrete.

While McPartlan’s analysis of the debate is helpful in understanding the different issues of each theologian, and his insertion of Zizioulas’s eschatological framework makes the distinction between ‘worldwide community’ and ‘essential mystery’ which in turn helps resolve the problem of Roman centralism, he does not offer anything to solve the debate as it stands. First, the problem of Roman centralism itself, by the end of the debate, had been put to the side as Ratzinger had acknowledged that, indeed, if the council had been trying to support a return to Roman centralism, this would have been a problem. Kasper moved his argument from saying that the CDF’s formulation was promoting this return to saying that it does not fix the problem of already present Roman centralism. Second, Kasper’s argument by the end of the debate had moved to include the problem of placing the priority of the church onto an abstraction. McPartlan does little to address this issue as his presentation of Zizioulas’s eschatological understanding of the universal church, though it be present in the Eucharist, is a future reality.

The second position to consider regarding the debate is that of James Massa. He builds his argument around a primarily sacramental understanding of the church, arguing for the primacy of the universal church, and building on McPartlan’s presentation of Zizioulas’s eschatological understanding of church. Massa’s argument begins with establishing that Ratzinger has used the sacramental understanding of church in earlier works and that this is where his argument for universal priority comes from. He draws out the tension of holding both the church as body of Christ as well as a sinful society that compromises the people of God. Commenting on Ratzinger’s work, he states, “Only sacrament allows for a way of holding in tension the inner and outer dimensions as well as the permanent structures and historical contingencies of the ecclesial subject.”

He moves to show how individual sacraments are incorporated into the universal church. Then he articulates how, up until this point, there is no visible contradiction with Kasper’s position. “Yet,” he states, “for the pope the structure of the church-sacrament also requires that a certain priority be given to the one over the many.” The reasoning for this becomes clear in his next paragraph.

Massa’s primary argument is that the church must be understood primarily as its universal aspect because of its relationship with God. He states:

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38 Ibid., 27-28.
39 Ibid., 30.
The church is not first something visible and institutional, even though in the present age it is most definitely both—and never so much so as when encountered in local churches gathered around their pastors for worship. But, it is for Ratzinger—and here he follows Augustine—fundamentally a communion of grace or a “sharing of gifts” [com-munera] that originates in the invisible realm, outside of history, and with no connection to geography. This communion begins in the exchange of love among the three divine Persons of the Trinity and grows, as it were, “outwardly” toward human beings who live in time and space. Through the mission of Christ, the divine sharing of gifts takes the form of structured worship, sacred texts and sacred ministry, as well as the other charismatic forms that arise spontaneously in the local communities. This communion of grace cannot reach human beings except through one of the multiple congregations that exist in time and in one place. But, its origin and final effect lie in the single, spatially and temporally undifferentiated community that exists outside the historically contingent existence of human beings (see Heb. 12:22-24). The church begins in the unity of divine communion and ends in our assimilation to that unity. During our earthly pilgrimage, our assimilation entails membership and worship in local churches, but they remain always the door, through which the one Christ and his one church come to take hold of us so that we can begin journeying back to the Father’s house.

This line of thought places the communion of the church in God, pre-existent to the history of the church, generating from the communion of the Trinity and flowing forth into the world. My critique of this placement will begin in the same place as my critique of McPartlan’s, that being the negligence of addressing Kasper’s argument of placing emphasis on abstraction over visible. This is shown by Kasper in his first response in America, which I have quoted earlier in this paper. The placement of the church in the communion of the Trinity is absolutely essential to understanding the church. However, the communion of the Trinity cannot be confused with the church. Placing the church in the Trinity only, reduces it to the notion, the idea, the form of communion and of unity. The church must be placed in relationship with God and must be modeled on our understanding that is the unity of the trinitarian hyposteses, but placing the church there without any reference to its relationship with human history negates its importance in human history. The mystery of the church is that the unity of the divine persons is in relation to the presence of the church in history. My contention is that the communion that Massa is referencing does not become the church until the people respond.

The relationship of the trinitarian sense of unity to the local churches and universal church is often referenced in discussions of ecclesiology. However, the reference to perichoresis and interpenetration is not often related directly to the multitude of understandings of this concept in trinitarian theology itself. In the final section of this paper, I will briefly relate the conversation of universal church and local churches to three diverse opinions in trinitarian theology which reflect the possibility of the simultaneity of universal church and local churches. These diverse opinions incorporate perichoresis in their theology and are diverse in their locations as well as their theologies.

The first theologian I will present is the North American, Catherine LaCugna. For LaCugna’s primary thesis of the practicality of the Trinity is supported in her desire to unite the conceptions of Divine life and the divine’s relationship with creation, in her terms: the unity of oikonomia and theologia. Thus, the unity of the Trinity’s ‘inner life’ and ‘economic life’ LaCugna defines perichoresis as, “being-in-one-another, permeation without confusion. No person exists by him/herself or is referred to him/herself; this would produce the number and therefore division within God.” LaCugna’s reflection on the perichoresis of the hypostases continues, “Father, Son, and Spirit are coequal because they are the same thing, namely, God. No person is prior to another person, no person is the reason for another’s existence, and each person is equally interdependent on every other person. The divine persons are united by love, the perfect expression of which is the

41 Ibid.
42 See ft. 20 above.

Holy Spirit who is bond of love between Father and Son.”

The surface level implications for ecclesiology alone allow for codependency, neither aspect prior to the other in importance or time, in the debate of the universal church and local churches. In LaCugna’s interpretation of perichoresis the necessary motion, after affirming its presence, is to say that one cannot exist without the other. In her discussions concerning the unity of oikonomia and theologia this necessary unity of universal church and local churches is even more clear. Oikonomia can only exist with reference to theologa because it is the expression of theologa. Theologa can only be seen with reference to oikonomia because oikonomia is the very expression of theologa. LaCugna states, “Theologa is what is given in oikonomia and oikonomia expresses theologa. Since our only point of access to theologa is through oikonomia, then an ‘immanent trinitarian theology of God is nothing more than a theology of the economy of salvation.’” Likewise, if we are going to affirm in ecclesiology that the universal church exists not only as ‘worldwide community’ but as ‘essential mystery’, then our only point of access to it is its movement in and with the local churches, established in a given place and time in human history. The separation of these terms in LaCugna’s theology means misunderstanding the reality of God. They can only be talked about as distinct from each other insofar as they are recognized to be dependent on each other.

Secondly, Jürgen Moltmann, a European theologian whose work primarily shows how God cannot be a static bystander outside of human history. As he asks, “Even if we relate ‘experience’ to the experiencing subject, concentrating it solely on the experience of the self in experience, it will still be permissible to ask, not only: how do I experience God? What does God mean for me? How am I determined by him? We must also ask the reverse questions: how does God experience me? What do I mean for God? How is he determined by me?” Because Moltmann begins his trinitarian theology with reference to the three hypostases in order to prevent God from being conceived as static, he must establish unity as coming from the distinction that is the Trinity.

Moltmann establishes the unity of the divine persons as an eschatological reality. Their work together in history moves them toward the eschatological moment. Velli-Matti Kärkkäinen states of Moltmann’s description the unity in the Trinity, “Being a dynamic concept, it is also ‘communicable unity and … an open, inviting unity, capable of interaction’ over against the traditional exclusive way that builds on the ideas of the oneness of the substance or the sameness of the absolute subject.” Moltmann reminds us of the danger in having a reality that exists outside of creation; that is: being perceived as static and immovable. Moltmann’s primary contribution to trinitarian theology is that he denies the difficult trend that God has no real investment in creation. In Moltmann’s theology, God is affected by historical events, primarily Christ’s crucifixion. If ecclesiology is to be rooted in this type of trinitarian theology, it must be cautious of designating the universal church as a static entity without regard to its historical manifestation. In Moltmann’s theology it is through the movement back and forth between creation and God that the Trinity exists. The universal church and local churches must interact with each other in order to realize themselves fully.

The final theologian I will look at is the Brazilian sister and eco-feminist theologian, Ivone Gebara. Gebara’s trinitarian reflection, though strictly speaking is more of a Philosophy of Religion than it is of a theology of the Trinity, offers a great insight into how to understand the Trinity. She begins by rooting her reflection in the “wonder of the human person,” which is essentially the recognition of unity in diversity. The wonder of the human person compromises the fact that no person is an individual in and of itself. She points to science and culture as the source of this reflection. Science shows us that though we are people and individuals, we are always in relationship to our surroundings. Culturally speaking, our ideas, customs and rituals stand in relationship to the billions of years of the universe’s history, which in turn form us. From this, Gebara develops her reflection on trinitarian theology from this, which is the recognition that the universe is mysteriously and profoundly connected in all its diversity. She states, “Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are symbolic expressions; as such they are a language that bespeaks experience. They refer to the profound intuition that all of us participate, along with everything that exists, in the same Breath of Life” and “The experience of the

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44 Ibid., 273.
45 Ibid., 224.
48 Ivone Gebara, Longing for Running Water: Ecofeminism and Lib-
Trinity brings multiplicity and the desire for unity into a single and unique movement, as if they were phases of the same breath.\textsuperscript{49}

Gebara’s reflection may not be something that is immediately received by everyone who reads it because its primary purpose is to shift the way we think about God to something that we may have never considered otherwise. Yet, her theology is compatible with many trinitarian theologians today. Concerning ecclesiology, Gebara’s reflection would not accept that the universal church could be something that could be possible without reference to history as she would see it as essentialism left behind by the platonic patriarchal dualism that is so readily found in Christianity. However, her insight that the Trinity reveals our desire to see the unity in the diversity of our lives, as well as the insight that we are already profoundly shown to be formed and related to the rest of the world and society relates directly to the conversation on how the universal church is connected to the local churches. In applying Gebara’s reflection, it would seem that there can be no separation between the ‘worldwide church’ to the local churches. The church is necessarily the profound mystery that it is one while existing in multiple places with very different people all at once.

These three trinitarian theologies all present the divine perichoresis as an integral point in the Trinity and thus their thoughts have direct implications on how the church sees itself. The inner unity of the church is essential to affirm in this discussion. Yet, unity cannot be taken as synonymous with the universal church, especially if this means that the only way to ensure unity is to sacrifice the diversity and concrete experience in history that exists in the church. Ratzinger, in no way suggests this blatantly but his position does hold that an abstract notion of church should be held in primacy over these historically concrete communities. The universal church, both as ‘worldwide community’ and as ‘essential mystery’ do not have any real meaning apart from their existence in time and space. The church, if it is to relate to God, must be integrally tied to the local churches. Each local communities’ manifestation of the universal church gives historical presence to the universal church, just as the universal church’s presence in the local churches gives them meaning and validation as church. This is why the notion of perichoresis between local churches themselves – for the sake of inner unity, and perichoresis between the universal church and local churches is so effective. They cannot exist and are meaningless without each other. The diversity that is creation must also be affirmed with unity, not under it. Kasper’s position incorporates both aspects of church successfully. This is true especially after reviewing these trinitarian theologians’ methods of asserting the unity that is present in God while fully emphasizing the diversity that is the Trinity.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 148.

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid., 154.
After this, Jesus went across the Sea of Galilee (of Tiberias). A large crowd followed him, because they saw the signs he was performing on the sick. Jesus went up on the mountain, and there he sat down with his disciples. The Jewish feast of Passover was near. When Jesus raised his eyes and saw that a large crowd was coming to him, he said to Philip, “Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?” He said this to test him, because he himself knew what he was going to do. Philip answered him, “Two hundred days’ wages worth of food would not be enough for each of them to have a little (bit).” One of his disciples, Andrew, the brother of Simon Peter, said to him, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish; but what good are these for so many?” Jesus said, “Have the people recline.” Now there was a great deal of grass in that place. So the men reclined, about five thousand in number. Then Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were reclining, and also as much of the fish as they wanted. When they had had their fill, he said to his disciples, “Gather the fragments left over, so that nothing will be wasted.” So they collected them, and filled twelve wicker baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves that had been more than they could eat. When the people saw the sign he had done, they said, “This is truly the Prophet, the one who is to come into the world.” Since Jesus knew that they were going to come and carry him off to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain alone.

John 6:1-15 (NAB)

Within the miracle of loaves and fishes there is a story of the acceptance or the possible rejection of our own gifts and the gifts of others.

Jesus poses a ridiculous question to his disciples as over five thousand people come seeking him out. He asks his disciples, “Where can we buy enough food for them to eat?” I imagine that as the disciples looked out at the sea of people this was one of the many times they wondered if they should go back to their day jobs because at best they were following a clueless man and at worst a lunatic. The author of the Gospel of John tells us that Jesus asked this to test the disciples, but Philip, not privy to this information, lets Jesus know that this is a completely impossible task. There is no way they can feed such a large crowd. As Philip points out the obvious to Jesus, Andrew points out a boy with five loaves and two fishes.

Nothing else is said about the boy beyond his offering, but I cannot help but wonder about him and what he might have to say to us. I imagine him overhearing the conversation between the disciples and Jesus. And I wonder why he chose to get involved. Did he see the hunger of others and want to help? Did he want to be a part of the disciples, be part of something big and beyond himself? While we cannot, of course, know his motivations, we do know by his action that for some reason he wanted to be involved and wanted to offer what he had.

I think it is important also to imagine what this boy risked by offering the five loaves and two fish. Where did he get the food? Did it belong to his family? Did he have to steal away with the food so that his parents would not see that he was about to give away what little they had? And what about approaching Jesus and his disciples? The young boy was with the crowd who was seeking Jesus out, but he would have been aware, to some degree, of the danger and unpredictability that was forming around Jesus and his disciples. And finally, it seems he would have known that his small amount of food could do little to feed such a huge crowd.

The apostle Paul in Ephesians 4:1 exhorts us to, “Live in a manner worthy of the call we have received.” I believe this little boy in the gospel might have something to say about what it means to live in a manner worthy of the call we have received. This boy offered his gifts despite the risk and despite the reality that what he had to offer was not enough to relieve the hunger of so many. He listened to the urge and call within himself to offer those five
loaves and two fish. He offered what he had, what was unique to him to give.

And so the question is posed to us, what stops us from giving in life? What stops us from living in a way worthy of our own unique call? Do we think that what we have is not enough, possibly even pathetically too little? Are we afraid that if we give there will not be enough for ourselves? Are we so concerned with what others will think that we are too afraid to risk?

So often our actions and decisions are based on whether we perceive that we will be welcomed or rejected by others. If the boy was at all afraid of possible rejection or ridicule his fears were well-founded. Andrew notices the boy but says to Jesus, “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish but what good are these for so many?” I think it is safe to bet that Andrew and the other disciples would have sent the naive little boy back to his family. But at this point the miraculous happens: Jesus accepts this boy’s offering, gives thanks, and what was little becomes enough to feed five thousand men and the thousands of uncounted women and children.

We learn from this boy what can really become of our gifts even if they seem to be little in our eyes or little to those around us. In Jesus, our gifts are not less, or unwanted, or imperfect; they are exactly, perfectly what is desired by God. They are beautiful and completely what is needed. They are accepted and not only accepted but also lifted up to the Father in gratitude, and, when distributed, they nourish more people than we will ever know.

But before moving too quickly to the miraculous ending of this story it is important to be attentive to Andrew and his response to the boy. Andrew saw the boy but quickly questioned what good his meager offering could do. We must also examine when practicality or the immensity of the problem blinds us to those who are risking to give. We must ask ourselves what blinds us to other’s offerings.

As I looked for an example in my own life I was reminded of when I was a campus minister. I worked at a fairly wealthy, predominantly white, Catholic college. I led service projects for the students. I often told the students that while our service was wonderful, necessary, and something to be celebrated, it was still a testimony to the imbalance of power and injustice in the world. That as white, wealthy Americans our service and giving even came out of a place of power. That our freedom to give and presumption that our giving would be received with open, thankful hands still symbolized a distortion of power. It was an example of why charity could not suffice but that we must also work for justice, to empower and respect others so that their gifts may be seen, fostered, and offered within the community as well. I never felt like my point got across to the students. It was an abstract idea that we did not put into practice.

One spring I went with a group of girls from the college to Juarez, Mexico, for a service-immersion trip. We were going to stay with a group of women in the colonias outside of Juarez. The colonias are shantytowns built on the outskirts of cities often on top of old landfills. Before heading out to the colonias we stopped at the markets in Juarez. The students shopped and toured for a couple of hours and when we returned to our van we discovered it had been broken into and all of our backpacks, clothes, and sleeping bags were stolen. The students were understandably upset and most felt like we should quit and head immediately back to the United States. But by the grace of God and a little conniving we convinced the students to stay and go to the women’s program in the colonias at least for the night.

When we got to the colonias we told the American sisters what had happened and how upset the girls were. The sisters relayed the story to the women who would be our hosts during our stay. It was March and, while the days were already very hot, the nights in the desert still got very cold, and many of the girls were wearing only flip flops, shorts, t-shirts. While the girls shyly stayed together near the van, the women left to go back to their homes. They returned with their own blankets, pillows, pants, sweatshirts, and shoes for the girls. The women and the girls then worked together past their language barriers and got to know one another by finding who had the right size shoes, pants, and sweatshirts. As they did this, one of the American sisters turned to me and said, “What a beautiful thing that God has brought you here so that the poor may cloth you.”

We found ourselves in a situation where we had to humbly receive the gifts of those whom we thought we were supposed to serve. We entered Mexico from a privileged place, as educated Americans assuming we were doing the offering, we were helping. And instead we were served in a very profound and meaningful way. Relationships were built that week that I do not think would have been
built if the girls had not been put in a situation to receive the gifts of these women.

Most of us, particularly in America, pride ourselves on our ability to provide for ourselves and not need the charity of others. We could have quite easily crossed the border, gone to the nearest Wal-Mart and purchased our own clothes, but instead we learned how to receive. The small gifts of used sneakers, pants, and sweatshirts were catalysts for a week of giftedness. Our time in Mexico, while short, was an incredibly meaningful week of living in community together. We got to know women who were a profound example of what it meant to risk and offer despite the innumerable obstacles they faced. Despite the fact that the men of their community and their government were unsupportive and even hostile to them. Despite the fact that many of the people just twenty miles across the border in the United States would label them as a problem and burden, blinded to the important, irreplaceable gifts they were offering.

And so we must ask ourselves, how are we the disciples? When do we come from a privileged place, working from a place of power where we do not have to accept the gifts and offerings from others? When do we not allow others the freedom to give because it is hard to receive? Or when do we, so practical and educated, see what others are offering and see it as way too little, like Andrew? When, by our own power, are we blinded to the power of Christ working through the one giving and the gift itself?

Perhaps we could spend some time asking ourselves when we need to be like the little boy. When do we need to risk? When do we need to offer our gifts even when we might think they are too little? How are we to live in a manner worthy of our call? And when do we act as the disciples? When do we blind ourselves to the other? Particularly in our faith, when do we act in pride, because of our knowledge or perceived closeness to God as Jesus’ disciples? When in our lives are people offering us their gifts, their unique and beautiful offerings and we are blind to them or outright reject them?

And most importantly, how can we live recognizing the power of Jesus? That while our gifts may seem small and others may think it is wise to send us back to where we came from, Jesus welcomes and even desires our gifts, just as they are. He takes the little and makes it into an abundance.

Let us pray that we can offer our gifts and receive those of others, so together our time and talent, our bread and fish may be set before the Lord so that it may be distributed back into the world. May we discover that through our offering not only will there be just enough to survive but our baskets will overflow and in our offering Jesus will turn our gifts into an abundance where all are satisfied and all are filled.
Beyond Settling Down

Stability is not a word which is in common usage among young adults who, having graduated from the University, have often not settled down in a particular place. Often it is something which people ask of us, or which we long for, but which is simply not part of our current reality. Of course, there are pressures which work both for and against seeking stability, but oftentimes young adults feel cut off from the seemingly stable societies which surround them, although these too are less stable than they were a century ago.

It’s easy to list some of the pressures which keep people from ‘settling down’ – entry-level jobs or volunteer positions are usually intended to be inhabited for one or two years. Educational degrees keep one moving from place to place proving the varieties of areas in which one needs to demonstrate competency. Our culture itself is becoming more fluid and less rooted: family and friends are scattered around the country or even the world, but are joined by cellular networks and video conferencing, so there is much less of an impetus for settling in a particular place. Furthermore, many of our former regional cultures are dissolving their differences into one undifferentiated whole, leading to a society in which most places are rather interchangeable. With the abundance of cheap travel and communication, it is easier and easier to travel continually, and we want to experience it all.

Of course, there are also pressures which encourage settling down. There are those pressures which push towards settling down for its own sake: often from family or friends who want one to settle near them. There are also other pressures which, if acceded to, would push one towards settling down, such as the many pressures to marry and have children.

Over the last decade, I have been involved in a variety of conversations with other young adults regarding their place in contemporary society. I lived for a year in an intentional community which is located in central Washington State, and at which the majority of people are in some state of transition. I was also involved with the North American Young Adult Consultation (NAYC) of the Lutheran World Federation (LWF), and was a delegate to both the LWF’s World Youth Consultation and the LWF Assembly in 2003. I worked with graduate students at Saint John’s School of Theology in Collegeville, Minnesota, and managed a residency program in Salt Lake City, Utah.

In the course of these many experiences, I have heard other young adults searching for a sense of stability in their current situations. Many are involved in academic life or work which is valuable, but which resists settling down in the traditional ways, at least for now. This work is important for both their further lives: they are working, gaining experience, reflecting on that experience in advanced degrees or training, or working with the poor, volunteering with NGOs, or undertaking parish work. All of these choices necessitate a certain instability of location.

My own life also serves as an example of the search for stability and its difficulty: After graduate school, I sought stability in the monastery but after three years determined that my calling was not to that life. Now I live thousands of miles from friends and family because my life and work root me in Salt Lake City, at least for now. Utah is the seventh province (six US states and one German Bundesstaat) I have lived in since I left my parents’ house. No two members of my immediate family live in the same state, and though I live in Salt Lake City, the preponderance of my important relationships is with people who live many hundreds, if not thousands, of miles away. With the exception of my three years in the monastery, it would be difficult to find a time since 1997 that I have lived at the same address for more than one year. Because we are incarnate people, such instability can also lead to an instability of heart. Out of my many conversations with other young adults, I have heard a deep longing for stability amidst the, often necessary, instability of life. This is a longing I know well, for it also lives in my heart.

In considering this often-repeated longing, I have become deeply convinced that there must be a certain stability which can transcend ‘settling down’ in the traditional ways. Stability must be possible, albeit more difficult, for those who must be transient. In this paper I will consider what the monastic tradition and the careful reflection which has come out of the monastic and oblate tradition,
and explore what such careful thinking on stability can offer to such as my many acquaintances across the country. Because many of the people I have met are deeply committed to the Church, they have often described their longing for stability in terms of a disconnect from to the traditional parish structure. Because of this, I will also consider how this stability beyond settling down might relate to the Church’s structures and outreach to young adults.

The early monastic tradition valued stability very highly; to some extent the monk was marked by the cell more than the habit, and the stability of the cell was the crucible in which the monk was expected to grow in love of God. This stability has grown into a variety of forms which are more and less obviously linked to the early ideal of stability in the cell. This development has taken three major directions which are represented in the literature: Cistercian, Benedictine, and Oblate. Of these, the largest category of reflectors belongs to the Cistercian tradition, the tradition of the three which has most emphasized local stability. Not surprisingly, there is also somewhat of a body of literature considering what stability might mean for the most mobile of the three: oblates. Representatives of the Benedictine tradition proper provide a different understanding of stability than is found in either the Cistercian or the Oblate tradition, and one which has much to say to people beyond its bounds.

Cistercian, Benedictine, and Oblate Reflections on Stability

The general thrust of most Cistercian considerations of stability is an emphasis on perseverance in the order. This will usually mean perseverance in one place, but this is not always the case. Cistercian tradition allows for monks to be moved from one house to another as is required by the needs of the order. Augustine Roberts, in a pair of articles, outlines the juridical aspects of this vow from a Cistercian understanding. These articles, while they overlap somewhat in the information contained, do compliment each other. The earlier article, which appeared in Cistercian Studies, is somewhat more simple in its articulation, but is also more beautiful and homiletic in its elocution, and so it provides a needed counterpoint to the more juridical tone of the later article, which seeks to articulate stability by means of the ways in which one can offend against stability. The earlier article also provides more biblical exegesis, which is very helpful.

The notion of stability which Roberts posits is of stability within the order and stability of heart within the monastic way of life. He draws a sharp distinction between enclosure and stability; although he does not wish to do away with enclosure, he sees enclosure not as stability, but as a servant of it which encourages stability of heart. He writes, According to St. Benedict, remaining in the enclosure of the monastery is something different from stability. The former refers to physical separation from the world and pertains rather to conversion of life, whereas Benedictine stability refers to being a permanent member of the group of persons who live within that enclosure. Stability is something personal. It is interpersonal communion or, to put it better, it is perseverance in this communion, that is to say, in the dynamism of renunciation and conversion to the love of Christ that constitutes the heart of the monastic community.

Robert’s article, written from a Cistercian perspective, and therefore assuming enclosure, both accepts that tradition and points beyond it to the true meaning of stability. In doing so, it defines stability in a remarkably similar way to that offered those whose practice of it appears most different.

Another Cistercian considering the meaning of monastic stability, one who attempts to provide a definition more grounded in its spiritual aspects, is Michael Casey. In this article, he begins with the discussion on this vow found in the Constitutions and Statues of the Cistercian Order of the Strict Observance (1990). His seven headings, which he distills from this document, speak first to the practices of stability, and then of the fruits which grow from stability well kept. These practices are: Aggregation

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2 He also refers to this as stability in the community (p. 258 of the Cistercian Studies article), but then later clarifies this language by preferring to discuss “stability in terms of “Love of the Order” in the article in Centered on Christ (124-131). This love of the order, while not specifically stability in itself, (particularly not stabilitas ordinis, or stability of heart), is a necessary condition for growing in stability, through “loving the monastery and the order as they are, not only as they should be” (127, italics removed).

3 Roberts. Cistercian Studies. 257-258. (italics his)
to the Local Community, Localization, Commitment to Practice, and Perseverance in Practice. Their fruits are Stability of Mind, Trust in Providence, and Love of the Brothers. It is not accidental that the progression is to Love – the entire Benedictine rule has as its goal a movement towards an expanded heart (Prol 49) which overflows with love for God, the community and the Abbot/ess (Ch 72).

As was pointed out earlier, while the Benedictine and Cistercian traditions of stability are somewhat different —Benedictines are stable within a community, rather than within the order, and generally have somewhat more permeable cloisters on a daily basis than members of Cistercian houses— they speak similarly about the goal of stability and both differentiate stability itself from the practices which seek to foster it.

Ambrose Wathen adds the notion that stability is necessarily linked to obedience in an article in Monastic Studies entitled “Conversation and Stability in the Rule of Benedict”. He states, “stability has the idea of perseverance, determination and firmness of intention; but not merely of intention, also of action, i.e. obedience to regulations”. To link stability with obedience is to underline the fact that stability does not just have to do with locality, but with persons, that is, with being in community come what may. “Stability is localized in this particular monastery. And by promising it the monk becomes a member of the community, i.e. is inserted into community life.”

This personal emphasis – that one is inserted into a community and its life – is underlined in an article by Adalbert de Vogüé entitled “How Ought Novices To Be Formed in Stability Today.” Although he gives little advice on the question which forms the title of this article, one piece of advice which he does give is, To conclude, it is without a doubt good to keep before out eyes and to put before the novices’ eyes the great examples of stability with which the monastic history is filled. From his fortieth to his ninetieth year, half a century, John of Lycopolis remains in his recluse’s cell. Dwelling on the Nile’s bank, Sara passes sixty years without glancing at the river out of curiosity. A celebrated anecdote, reported a little differently by Sulpicius Severus and Cassian, claims that two brothers remained forty years with out the sun’s seeing the one eating or the other getting angry. While at first glance de Vogüé seems to be confusing stability and enclosure, on closer scrutiny it is clear that he is speaking of what he calls “stability in virtue” — monastic life which has borne fruit in stability of heart, which is, in turn, borne witness to in practice. Furthermore, by his advice to keep the great monastic saints before the eyes of newcomers and members of the community, he is recommending a practice which serves to keep the community stable in its relationship to the wider monastic community through time. One must not only come to live with and love the community present, but also with those who have gone before, and those who will come to seek entrance to the community after oneself. Stability means coming to deal with not only present reality, but the roots of that present as found in history, and the future which will inevitably follow, for one has promised to remain.

Oblates’ and others who do not live a monastic life in community have also contributed to the reflections on stability, which we will consider. This vision of stability can be particularly helpful for our consideration of stability for those who have not joined religious communities and are unlikely to do so. One oblate, whose reflections on stability are helpful to our present discussion, is Gerald Schlabach, an oblate of St. Andrew’s Abbey in Cleveland, Ohio. Schlabach claims that, “to live any kind of serious Christian life in our age may require the subtle but stubborn form of countercultural resistance that Benedictines know as stability.” Again, at first glance, his argument seems to be calling for a form of enclosure, although he uses the language of “staying put”. However, he is not really asking if Christians ought to stop moving, but rather if they might be caught in motion which is frenetic and frenzied, rather than considered and necessary. He asks,

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6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 Ibid.
In an obsessively mobile society, one wonders whether Christians can be the body of Christ together at all if we will not slow down, stay longer even if we cannot stay put indefinitely, and take something like a vow of stability. Slow down, because what many call postmodernity may really be hypermodernism. Stay longer, because there is no way to discern God’s will together without commitment to sit long together in the first place. A vow of stability, because it is no use discerning appropriate ways to be Christian disciples in our age if we do not embody them through time, testing, and the patience with one another that transform good ideas and intentions into communal practices.

Notice that the emphasis, again, is on community: being formed into the Body of Christ through common life in discernment. By committing oneself to a place, one is both in truth and in effect committing oneself to the people who are in that place. Should they have some measure of stability, then there comes to be a real commitment to a community which can grow and seek to become more fully Christ’s body together.

Another writer who considers what stability might have to do with the mobile individual is Paul Wilkes in his article “Stability – A Sense of Where You Are.” This article does not have the emphasis on commitment to places and people in quite the same way as does that from Schlabach, instead, it is focused more on what stability might have to do with the mobile individual. Certainly this has an impact on how those individuals would relate to the communities in which they live, however, he places much more emphasis on what stability might mean for the individual internally, rather than as lived out by a group of people. He writes:

What is more important than walls and signs forbidding entry – as we see in monasteries – is the interior cloister. For this is the place where God truly dwells, where we dwell in unity with him – even though we may fight such compelling intimacy. Finding a perfect geographical space is often not possible. Inner space awaits our bidding. The interior cloister sets our soul on solid ground so that we might not frantically thrash about, diffusing our energies, and fail to see the graces that abound for the soul wholly present. At times, our path or such graces are often obscure. But the interior cloister, that place of solitude and silence, summons us to enter into this holiest of holy places when God awaits us.

This vision, while lovely and true if nuanced properly, could also lead to an unhealthy apatheia which is not the necessary detachment from the sinful attachments to fleeting wealth, health, and comforts, but the sinful fleeing from others to seek peace in oneself apart from others – a form of narcissism which disguises itself as a search for God. This is not what Wilkes is suggesting, of course, but his emphasis on the interior and the personal may be heard in this way by our individualist, narcissistic society. The interior cloister that he describes ought be sought with others in common life, as is suggested by Schlabach. This balance is taken up by Dietrich Bonhoeffer in his celebrated book Life Together. He admonishes communities that they can only love each other if that love flows out of a love of God in Christ; if the community is bound only in the fallible love of humans for each other, then it will — and should —dissolve.

One interesting theological question which arises in several of the articles written on this topic is the question of the stability of Israel as a wandering people. In an address to the Monastic Institute of Federation of Americas 1973, Aelred Kavanagh addresses the stability of the wandering Israelites in terms of...
Stability for the nomads is stability of trust—that is, faith—in the God who “brought [them] out of the land of Egypt with such great power and with so strong a hand.” Kavanagh combines this with a consideration of the conversatio (which he depicts as growth) of these nomadic peoples, to describe “a process of development which is grounded in a fidelity which is not sterile but which contains within itself the seeds of growth.” As a people of nomads, their stability is not found in worship in one place, as it would for the Baals, but in fidelity to the God who is faithful to the people.

This biblical theme is picked up and expanded in the Gospel of John. The Rule of the Society of St. John the Evangelist, an Episcopalian monastic order located in Cambridge, Massachusetts and in Cowley, England, stresses this theme of John’s Gospel.

The beloved disciple did not hide from the suffering of Christ at Golgotha but took his stand there with Mary. By being steadfast together at the cross, enduring all that others found unbearable, they remained in Jesus’ love. If we abide in that perfect love shown on the cross we will receive the grace to face together all that we are tempted to run from in fear. Christ’s gift of enduring love will be at the heart of our life as a community, as it was in the new family which he called into being from the cross when he gave Mary and John to one another as mother and son.

The abiding love of Christ, in which he is faithful to the Father’s call to bear the weight of human sin through the kenotic acceptance of death on the cross, becomes the gift of faith which makes our faithfulness possible. In the paradox of faith, we cannot have faith without being first steadfast in the one who calls himself the vine and us his branches, yet it is through our faith in him that we are given the gift of steadfastness which allows us to abide in him. At our baptism, which the Church has always likened to the crossing of the Red Sea, we are not only joined to Christ, but also to the People of God journeying like the Israelites in the desert with all the Christians baptized before us. Abiding in Christ, then, is abiding in the people whom Christ has also called, to continue to faithfully respond to the call to remain stable in Christ, and to grow in fidelity to him.

Stability for Today’s Young Adults

I began this consideration by outlining the problem of articulating what Christian stability might look like among young adults who are not able to settle down in the traditional ways. In light of what we have seen so far, then, it remains to set out how the monastic traditions of reflection on stability can speak to such a need. In order to consider this, I will consider four stabilities which may form the stability of a given person: Stability of place, of community, of faith, and of heart.

Stability of place is certainly what most people would immediately think of, but it is often not available to many young adults for many of the reasons that listed in the introduction. However, it is something which can be appropriated to some extent. As Schlabach points out, one who cannot stay forever can often stay longer, and move slower. It is sometimes possible to choose where one will go when such a transition is required, and one may be able to choose a place where one already has lived, or has significant connections. One author who describes this kind of homecoming is Kathleen Norris, who writes of coming to know herself and her family by moving somewhere she had never lived, but where her family had deep roots: the Dakotas. Because humans are embodied persons, places have deep impact on us, and the local cultures which persist can only be known slowly, by living in them over time. To live somewhere over time is both to be formed by the place, and to form it to oneself.

A more available form of stability which we might seek is stability in community. As the world becomes not only more mobile but more interconnected, it becomes possible to remain connected to people on a regular basis over great distance. Several years ago I was living in a remote community in the Pacific Northwest, one of my college housemates was living in Columbia, South Carolina, and the other in Chicago. Despite the

15 Exodus 32:11 NAB
16 Kavanagh, 273.
fact that I had no access to email or phones, we maintained contact by writing letters which would circulate among the three of us. Now that I have returned to life “on the grid” we try to talk often, and all gather together for Thanksgiving each year. This annual celebration has become a grounding point for me on a par with my family gathering for Christmas. It is in these settings that we are able to continue old discussions (and arguments) and to know ourselves through those we know best. It is through community that we often see ourselves reflected, both our strengths and our faults – and not being present to those we know is a form of hiding from ourselves. Because of this, many chose their location not based on which job will give them the higher salary, or better benefits, but because there were people important to them in one place or another. This seems like it should be an obvious choice, but many of us come from professional families which assume that location is determined by our vocations as teachers, pastors, or physicians, rather than those as friend, child or sibling.

Something ought be said about relationships and stability. In a culture in which relationships are expected to flower and fall, often in quick succession, and with the expectation of little responsibility, stability calls people to take their commitments seriously. Stability in the monastic tradition is closely related to obedience, which is traditional language for marriage as well; husbands and wives are expected to be obedient to each other. Gerald Schlabach states this explicitly when he states,

> my wife, to whom I have made my most stable vow, is my abbess. . . . after eighteen years of a marriage that we dedicated to Christ’s service, my wife is the one person in the world who is best positioned to confront my illusions, test my hopes, call me to hospitality, remind me to ‘regard all the utensils and goods of [our household] as sacred vessels of the altar, aware that nothing is to be neglected’ (RB 31.10-11), and generally, gently, nudge my life unto the Lord. To imagine any stability that neglects obedience to this relationship would invite self-deception, that most tenacious obstacle to conversion of life. 

The family is the most stable portion of many people’s lives. It is a shame that this is not true for all people, but much of this instability comes directly from not being willing to be obedient to each other, wives to husbands, husbands to wives, children to parents, and parents to children. Stability requires letting go of some of my pet projects and desires for the sake of the other; it requires love.

The advent of modern communication also changes the ways in which we can remain stable in relationships, in both positive and negative ways. The difference between my communication with my college housemates now and when we were writing letters is more than just the form. Though none of us is in the same place we were in 2002, we are just as far away as we were (Now: Utah, Washington State, Iowa). Despite our distance, we are in communication more often now than before. Our interactions are both regular and often concerned with the little things of life as email, text messages and Facebook tend to encourage. This kind of interaction is the stuff our lives are made of. We know the little things which together form the big ones. On the other hand, when we were writing our round-robin letters, the longer, reflective form encouraged deeper thinking and conversation not unlike the late evenings over a drink that had frequently occurred in our senior year living room. Our Thanksgiving gatherings and the less-frequent extended phone calls can also fill this need, although it may be a while between such conversations. It seems to me that both of these forms of communication are what happen when we live with others and that both are necessary for real friendship. As we persevere in friendship, both little, daily knowledge and more sustained reflection contribute to the self-gift which is itself the path to the good zeal practiced in love.

Faith is another area in which stability is a necessary, if difficult, virtue. This does not mean that our faith ought never change, or that we may not grow in our understanding or our trust of God. However, it does mean that radical departures which do not grow out of our faith ought be examined. It also calls us to stability in a faith community – both on the local level and as one travels. Generally speaking, one’s roots in a particular rite or church community are not something which ought to be shed easily. Even when one travels there is continuity and stability with those with whom one is in communion. This is often more complex than the fairly simple rules of which church body is in communion with which other. Culture certainly plays a role. Stability in the community of faith means that we deals with

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19 Schlabach, 18-19.
our traditions in both their strengths and weaknesses, and don't angrily storm out when we do not get our way. Although someone might be called to join another communion for one reason or another, and the community which one is leaving ought support that when it is a real vocation, leaving out of anger or spite ought be seriously questioned. Stability means that we are often stuck with people who are difficult, even when the grass may seem greener in another ecclesial paddock. This is as true of parishes as it is of churches. The parish where I happen to be might not be the most friendly, or liturgical, or even orthodox – but stability would call me to careful discernment of how I might help that parish, and how I might be being called to grow by them.

Stability in faith also means that we must persevere in the practices of our faith, both liturgical (like attendance at the services of the church and private prayer) and everyday (like the call to hospitality or good stewardship of resources). These practices, including taking care with our time, with our belongings and with each other help us become, over time, more fully the people we were created to be and in small ways aid the coming of the reign of God.

Of course, the goal of all stability, both monastic and secular, is stability of heart. We come to know and are known by a particular community in a particular place or within a particular ecclesial expression and so come to be formed more fully into children of God. Stability of heart which grows in us through our other forms of stability is stability in the love of God which allows us to journey without capsizing, to trust in that love which sustains us even when it may seem impossible. This stability is difficult to describe fully, as it relates differently in each situation, but is the confidence of one who has been tested, sustained by God through the community, through gifts of the Spirit, and through prayer, and has come to trust that God will provide what is needed. It ends up looking very much like the faith to which Jesus continually calls his disciples, which he describes as the opposite of fear (cf. Mt 8:28, 14:3, Mk 4:40).

For those of us who seem very unstable in our society, particularly those young adults who are not going through the process that used to be expected, and which is known as settling down, stability is still an important piece of a Christian life, though it may need more work than in previous generations. Stability found through stable community, through stability of faith, perhaps through stability of place, and leading to true stability of heart can be sought, even though its forms have changed in our more mobile, technological society. This is not to say that such stability will necessarily come easily, or that our society is well equipped to promote stability. On the contrary, our society promotes instability and fluidity, always looking for the next big thing. Stability may call us to counter-cultural decisions, such as not taking a promotion for the sake of remaining in a particular place or with particular people. Stability in faith certainly will call people to resist the contemporary drive to always seek something new, whether that is some new magic formula of prayer or meditation or spiritual practice, or some self-help plan which will give meaning and purpose to any life. Stability in community will call us to dispense with the assumptions of our society that people are easily replaced, that relationships ought to be disposable, and that one can be free from the responsibilities towards another which community or particular relationships impose. As we seek a stability of life which promotes a stability of heart, we trade much of our independence for love, and are called to follow in the way of the cross. It is appropriate that one of the early and perduring images of the monastic life lived well is martyrdom: bearing witness with one’s life for the sake of others and for the sake of the Gospel. As we seek our own stability of heart, it will call us to allow ourselves to die in bigger and smaller ways for the Gospel, but we are freed to do so by of our hope that God will “bring us all together to eternal life” (RB 72:12).

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20 While it is somewhat outside the scope of this paper, those interested in further consideration of such practices as should read: Dorothy C. Bass, ed. Practicing our Faith: A Way of Life for a Searching People. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publisher, 1998). There is also an associated series of book-length reflections on various practices of Christian life.
More than Suicidal Swine: Jesus’ Mission to the Gentiles in Mark 5:1-20

Jeffrey R. Reed

Introduction

Often viewed as another of the Jesus miracle stories, the interaction with the demoniac at Gerasene is a much richer, deeper story. I will examine the story in its entirety, review several interpretations of the story, and offer my alternative view of the deeper meaning behind Mark’s description of Jesus’ foray into Gentile territory.

Narrative

The episode begins as Jesus has stilled the storm and rebuked the disciples for their lack of faith as they crossed the lake and encountered a storm (Mark 4:35-41). Jesus has stilled the seas, demonstrating his control over the chaotic forces of nature, and his actions become a symbol of divine power (Pss 89:8-9; 106:8-9; Isa 51:9-10). Crossing the lake or Sea of Galilee represents not only an actual physical barrier between the Jews and Gentiles but a symbolic one as well.

They have crossed the boundary, landing on “the other side” (v. 5:1) in the land or region of the Gerasenes. There has been a great deal of scholarly debate over the name of the town or village to which Mark is referring. Most commentaries note that Gerasa is some thirty miles from the shore of the Sea of Galilee making it unlikely the herd of swine ran that distance to plunge themselves into the water. There is also the lack of cohesiveness with Matthew’s version of the story (8:28-34), which places the event in Gadara, a village only five or six miles from the lakeshore. Regardless of the location, Mark is more interested in “articulating geo-spatial ‘space’ in terms of narrative symbolic than actual place names.” Getting bogged down on the historical accuracy of the location misses the larger point, that Jesus has purposefully entered Gentile territory.

As Jesus leaves the boat, he is accosted by a man who has been living among the nearby tombs. The man is possessed by an unclean spirit. Although the man is most likely a Gentile, Mark goes to substantial effort to inform the reader that under rabbinic law he was unclean: he lived among the tombs and the dead (v. 3), he cut himself (v. 5; see Deut 14:1), and he lived among unclean animals (v. 11). These conditions would also indicate under rabbinic law that the man was indeed mad. The text would lead the reader to conclude that the man had been exiled from his community to the tombs. Repeated attempts to shackle him with chains and manacles had all been unsuccessful; nobody had been able to subdue him (v. 4). This man is physically strong and the spirit that has possessed him has made him even stronger. The stage is set for a dramatic interaction between Jesus and the demoniac. The sheer strength of the man and the strength of the spirit possessing him provide the reader at least a hint that this is a second battle between Jesus and Satan (Mark 1:13).

The cosmic nature of the exchange that is about to be played out is emphasized by Mark’s description of the man crying out among the tombs, “Night and day” and “on the mountains” (v. 5). That he was active during the night indicates he had little or no fear of the evil that was thought to be present in the darkness. Generally speaking mountaintops indicate a divine revelation; symbolizing where people went to meet the living God. Jesus went there to appoint disciples (3:13) and to pray (6:46). The possessed man, however, went there to cry out and to hurt himself. Interestingly, Mark juxtaposes the tombs, places of the dead, and the mountains, places of the living, here as well (just as he does with the night and the day). Mark also uses a great deal of the language and imagery from Isaiah (65:3-5) in which Isaiah rebukes the “rebellious people” who have incorporated Gentile rituals. They too sleep among the tombs and eat the flesh of swine. For Isaiah and Mark, spending a night in a tomb is pagan behavior.

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4 This then leaves open the possibility that Mark expected purity laws to be applicable to Gentiles who enter the community as they are to Jews who do the same.
5 The Gospel of Mark, Donahue and Harrington, 164.
6 Ibid.
As mentioned earlier, the possessed man is also bruising himself or cutting himself with stones. This is often seen as an indication that the man suffered from some type of mental illness, and ultimately his healing is a sign of hope for those who suffer from a similar illness. While certainly a valid interpretation of the narrative, it is unlikely that Mark structured the story to convey this message and this hermeneutic is a construct of our modern times. Regardless, Mark has carefully painted a rather ominous and bleak outlook for the possessed man that evokes a great sense of sympathy, even empathy, toward him. The man personifies self-destruction and social isolation.

The man, seeing Jesus from afar, runs to him and prostrates himself before Jesus. This verse is placed in great tension with 5:2, which states that he accosted Jesus the moment that he stepped from the boat, from which we would assume that he was very close to Jesus. The demoniac has apparently returned and is in close proximity to Jesus and falls to the ground, prostrating before him, a sign of obedience to Jesus. That he would subject himself in such a manner suggests that he knows who Jesus is and even that this isn't their first encounter with each other. The man cries out to Jesus repeating the same name of which he is possessed by a great number. The answer is of course, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” The man is possessed by a great number of demons, greatly raising the stakes for the cosmic battle that will ensue between the forces of death and Jesus. Traditionally, the reference to Legion has been understood to be a subtle reference to the occupying Roman army. Most commentators will note that a legion refers to unit of soldiers numbering about six thousand. This socio-political analysis of the text would therefore indicate that Jesus was making a veiled attempt to rid the land of the occupying Roman army, but Jesus wouldn’t be expelling Roman troops from Jewish lands but rather from Gentile areas. Therefore, this political reading makes little sense as it was likely that the Gentiles had benefited from Roman rule and were quite friendly to their occupation. They certainly would not have viewed their occupation as oppressive as the Jews on the other side of the Sea of Galilee would have. Still other commentators see this as somewhat of a literary device used by Mark to provoke humor from Jewish readers of the text. Most notably, Jewish readers would have found it quite humorous to have the demons, named after Roman authorities, enter swine and eventually kill themselves.

The parallel text in Matthew (8:29a) is explicit in the eschatological reference: “What have you to do with us, O Son of God? Have you come here to torment us before our time?” The narrative hits an awkward tone in 5:8 and presents some difficulty in interpretation. In “he had been saying” (v. 8), the text would indicate that Jesus had been trying unsuccessfully to exorcise the demon. John R. Donahue and Daniel J. Harrington cite several sources that lead to a conclusion that the text implies Jesus was about to do something, i.e., exorcise the demon.

In 5:9 Jesus speaks for the first time in the narrative, engaging the demoniac; he asks the possessed man “What is your name?” Knowing the name of the demon gives the exorcist power over it. The answer is of course, “My name is Legion; for we are many.” The man is possessed by a great number of demons, greatly raising the stakes for the cosmic battle that will ensue between the forces of death and Jesus. Traditionally, the reference to Legion has been understood to be a subtle reference to the occupying Roman army. Most commentators will note that a legion refers to unit of soldiers numbering about six thousand. This socio-political analysis of the text would therefore indicate that Jesus was making a veiled attempt to rid the land of the occupying Roman army, but Jesus wouldn’t be expelling Roman troops from Jewish lands but rather from Gentile areas. Therefore, this political reading makes little sense as it was likely that the Gentiles had benefited from Roman rule and were quite friendly to their occupation. They certainly would not have viewed their occupation as oppressive as the Jews on the other side of the Sea of Galilee would have.

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9 Interestingly, only Donahue and Harrington make note of this discrepancy within the story. They attribute the first encounter (5:2) as one that previews the entire story while the intervening verses describe the demoniac before moving the attention to Jesus as the exorcist (5:6-10). It could also indicate that even during the events that are unfolding the demon-possessed man was running around wildly as he had been doing prior to Jesus’ arrival.
10 The Gospel of Mark, Donahue and Harrington, 164.
11 A Costly Freedom, Byrne, 96.
12 The Gospel of Mark, Donahue and Harrington, 165.
13 My emphasis added. Also note the use of the plural in Matthew where two demoniacs are said to have approached Jesus.
15 The Gospel of Mark, Donahue and Harrington, 66.
legion in reference to demons is also not unique. Demons refer to themselves in such a manner when questioned by Solomon (Test. Sol. 11:5; see also 5:1-13; 11:3; and 13:1-7).  

The demons beg and bargain with Jesus not to drive them out of the land. Evidently they have found a place to their liking and hope to continue demonizing the area even if they are driven from this particular individual. They beg Jesus to let them inhabit a group of swine grazing on a nearby hillside. Therefore, unclean spirits enter unclean animals. Jesus grants their request, sending them out to the pigs. Again, Solomon's interaction with a demon plays out in Mark's narrative (Test. Sol. 11:5). The pigs, numbering in the thousands, run headlong into the sea killing themselves, reminding the reader of Pharaoh's army being swept away during the Exodus story (Exod 15:4).  

Modern readers of the story are commonly troubled by the notion that Jesus would wantonly kill such a large number of livestock. While these concerns are reasonable, they demonstrate the dangers of literalism, thereby missing the point of Jesus' power over the demons. The suicidal swine reinforce the uncleanness of the demons and potential for destruction that they pose to those living near them. It also demonstrates a certain amount of cunning on the part of Jesus. He allows the demons to negotiate and they are likely pleased that he hasn't expelled them from the region. They likely don't count on their destruction as Mark describes it, however. Jesus has used the same chaotic forces that he tamed prior to his arrival in Gerasene to ride the land of demons; the Gentile region is now clean.  

The swineherds leave the area and begin telling, or announcing, what had happened in the city and the surrounding countryside (v. 15). The people of the region come to see what has happened; evidently a couple thousand pigs jumping off a cliff didn't happen every day. The crowds see Jesus and the once-possessed man who is now clothed and speaking normally. It is obvious to them that he has been cleansed of the demons. Unlike those near the exorcism in Capernaum who were “amazed” (1:27), these people are afraid. So frightened are they that they plead with Jesus to leave the area. Some commentators claim the plea to leave the area is because of the destruction of their property, i.e., the swine. This again is an attempt to introduce history into the narrative and again misses the point Mark is trying to make. The people are afraid because they didn’t expect to see the man sitting with Jesus, upright and speaking coherently.  

Jesus obliges the people. As he is about to leave, the formerly possessed man pleads with Jesus to allow him to “be with him” (v. 18). The man is begging to be part of the group following Jesus in the same tone that the demons begged not to be sent out of the region and used by the people of the region when they pleaded with Jesus to leave the area. The call of the disciples (3:14) is repeated here ("be with him") as well. The man not only is begging to be among Jesus’ followers but also to be counted among the Twelve. Jesus denies the man’s request, however, for Jesus is the one who calls people to discipleship (3:13). Instead the man is instructed to go back home and tell his family just what Jesus had done for him and how the Lord had bestowed his mercy upon him (v. 19). This sending of the cleansed Gentile stands in stark contrast to the Jews that Jesus had previously healed or exercised. In those cases Jesus had either forbid them telling what had happened (1:43-44) or made no request for them to speak of his deeds. In the case of the Gentile man, there is no messianic secret. The man goes throughout the Gentile region proclaiming what had happened to him just as Jesus had instructed him. Apparently the man was quite a successful missionary as well, as the story concludes by noting that “all were amazed,” presumably by the story he told about Jesus’ work and God’s mercy (v. 20).  

Interpretations of the Gerasene Demoniac  

There are basically three prevailing interpretations of the story of Jesus and the Gerasene demoniac; one is “traditional” in that it demonstrates Jesus as a miracle worker. I see the other interpretations somewhat more compelling and will focus on them. Both of these interpretations see the story as one of liberation. The first interpretation strongly suggests that the story was Mark’s subversive manner of uniting the people to stand up and reject the
Roman occupation, that this story in particular and Mark’s gospel in general were political manifestos aimed at reminding the Jewish community that Jesus had come to free them from the bondage of the Roman occupation. Indeed, Ched Meyers has taken this Markan story and used it to turn the entire gospel into what is basically a liberation theology. While Meyers does an admirable job relating the early Christian community to the problems we face in modernity, i.e., “empire building, multi-corporate liars,” and scorched earth environmental policies, his political reading is largely flawed. Meyers points to the use of words that promote military imagery in 5:1-20. For example, “Legion” is in direct reference to the occupying Roman forces; the term for herd in reference to the swine is *agile,* a term also used to denote new recruits to the Roman army; the phrase “he dismissed them” suggests a military command; and the pigs *charging* into the sea provides an image of troops rushing into battle. As mentioned earlier, the pigs charging into the sea also recalls the fate of Pharaoh’s army in the Red Sea. While these images may be real, what is less certain is that Mark intentionally used them to push forward a political agenda. It is as likely that these terms were central to people that had been occupied by a foreign force for some time, i.e., they made sense to the people living in war-torn first-century Palestine. Meyers’s approach is well thought out and represents a valid, modern hermeneutic of Mark’s gospel. It fails, however, to recognize the hidden symbolism that is common in the Markan text.

The other liberation view of this story focuses on the mental state of the possessed man. A number of recent journal publications have focused on this aspect of the story. One of the more compelling articles relates the story to broken lives caused by mental illness. Gail O’Day notes that the man had been given up for dead by his community, a community that is lacking in compassion. In modern terms the possessed man had “suicidal tendencies,” he was beyond hope, and his suffering was unabated. By yielding to the grace present in Jesus and God’s mercy, the man acknowledges his lack of independence. It is by that same grace and mercy that he is able to live again. Jesus’ power to expel hatred and reestablish love is the most extraordinary power there is, its power overcomes death with life. It is this reading of Mark that perhaps comes closest to what I see as the central message of the story.

*An Alternative Reading*

It is my contention that Jesus has crossed the Sea of Galilee intentionally to begin his mission to the Gentiles, and Mark uses this story to foreshadow Jesus’ own death and resurrection. While several resurrection events have occurred prior to this story in Mark (cf. 1:35; 2:9; 4:35) this story amplifies the resurrection and its cosmic implications. Clearly the man that is possessed, for all practical purposes, is dead. Moreover, he is dead three times over: he is unclothed and ostracized from his community, he is possessed by unclean spirits, and he himself exists among the dead. That he is thrice dead reflects the three days that Jesus is dead before appearing to the women at the tomb.

The man, or the demon possessing him, also knows who Jesus is; they have met before. I believe this represents a continuation of the cosmic battle between Jesus and Satan that began in 1:12. Satan represents death and hatred, and therefore the possessed man is full of hatred. This is hatred that will eventually lead to death, but not until he, like Jesus, suffers. The man cannot be bound with chains or shackles because chains and shackles represent a vain attempt by humanity to restrain death, something only God can do. Death and hatred are powers greater than humans themselves, only the love and the grace of God can bind death and restore us to life. Jesus rebukes hatred, sending it to its own death inside the swine. Just as the man was resurrected by defeating the demon, i.e., death, so too is Jesus. As the demons leave the man and enter the swine, eventually killing themselves, we fully see the resurrection. The man is clothed, seated with Jesus, speaking normally, and he has left the tomb. He is fully restored, resurrected.

The reaction of the people to the man being cured is strikingly similar to the women who enter the

25 *Binding the Strongman,* Meyers, 191.
24 Ibid., xvii.
23 Ibid., 191.
28 Mark demonstrates that Jesus has largely been dismissed as a prophet by his own Jewish community (3:13-35), which may be the reason he has left Galilee seeking to spread the news of the kingdom of God.
tomb on the third day; both groups were seized with terror and were afraid. The Gentiles were afraid but not because they had lost their swine at the hands of Jesus. They were afraid because they didn’t expect to see the demon-possessed man alive, let alone seated at Jesus’ side completely resurrected. Evidently they are as unwilling as the people of Israel to accept the one who can drive demons from their lives. By choosing to ask Jesus to leave, the Gerasenes are saying they are comfortable with their lives and are rejecting the uncertainty of a life that Jesus calls us to, even if it means living with demons. Similarly, the women at the tomb were afraid; they expected to see Jesus dead. Mark’s parallel resurrection story is powerful in that it is the first event in Gentile territory; it foreshadows to the Gentiles that his resurrection will represent a new creation that will include them. For Mark, this passage represents the real ending to his gospel; it is held in tension with the empty tomb (16:1-8) in deliberate fashion. One shortcoming of my interpretation is that in prior exorcisms and healings, Jesus requests the healed individual to rise or stand (2:9) suggesting a true physical resurrection. Jesus makes no request to the possessed man. I contend, however, that when he appears clothed that is a truer reflection of a resurrection.

Finally, I would argue that the demoniac presents the first commissioning, if not the first mission, of a disciple in the Mark’s account. While Jesus has called the Twelve earlier in Mark’s gospel (1:16-20; 2:13-14), it won’t be until after the encounter at Gerasene that he sends them on their mission (6:6b-13). Up until the incident with the possessed man in Gerasene Jesus had purposefully avoided any unnecessary publicity, going so far as to instruct the leper not to tell anyone of the miracle (1:44). Therefore, sending the cured man from Gerasene to proclaim Jesus’ works represents a dramatic shift in the overall mission. It is even more dramatic when one considers the cured man is a Gentile. The first person commissioned to proclaim Jesus’ works is a Gentile, sent into Gentile territory to tell them that they too will be resurrected and be part of God’s new creation.

Commentaries and interpretations that focus on the liberating theme of this story are certainly within reason and to a large degree are correct. Nonetheless, I contend that they are correct for the wrong reason. Jesus is indeed a liberating figure, but it is through his death and resurrection that we are liberated, not through an exorcism or a healing. The once-possessed man in Gerasene bears witness that each of us, complete with demons and whatever other baggage we might have, are capable of resurrection through the extraordinary power of Christ’s love that leads us from death into life.

Chauvet and O’Connor: An Encounter of Sacramental Life and Aesthetics

Louis-Marie Chauvet’s work *The Sacraments* contributes to the field of sacramental theology in many ways. Two of his most significant contributions come from a postmodern approach to language and culture, and an understanding of the Christian life immersed in scripture, sacraments, and ethical action. These contributions are also mirrored in the symbolic writing of the literary and theological contribution of Flannery O’Connor. Through an investigation of Flannery O’Connor’s short stories and lectures, I hope to demonstrate that her fiction both elucidates Chauvet’s claims regarding symbolic language which help shape the reality of Christian life and offer the additional aspect of aesthetics, to Chauvet’s triadic model. Because O’Connor uses symbolic language to promote the Christian life, which Chauvet proposes, she offers another level of symbolization to Christian identity through the artistic medium of her fiction. In order to understand the benefits of Flannery O’Connor’s fiction in Chauvet’s claims about Christian identity, I will now turn to Chauvet’s ideas on symbolic language and Christian life.

Fr. Louis-Marie Chauvet, a French sacramental theologian, reacts to two models of sacramental theology that he finds to be insufficient. The first model is the classical Roman Catholic understanding of sacrament that was the primary means and objective efficacy of the sign that produced grace. Chauvet takes issue with some theological implications resulting from this understanding of sacrament as grace-producing objective reality. Sacraments in this model are imagined as instrument, remedy, channel, and germ. These images describe sacraments as mediatorial and as signs, pointing to something supernatural and therefore otherworldly and unlike anything of the natural world. They are understood only as the objective indicator of the divine. The sacraments, in this model, were the principal means of communication with humans, acting as a type of bridge between supernature and nature. They were also the only way in which the natural could communicate with the supernatural (communicate may even be too strong of a word here). Grace received, as a result of the sign-act could be stored up in order to atone for sins committed. Chauvet is critical of such a highly economic and linear conception of sacrament.

The subjectivist model has appeared in various times throughout history; and essentially reverses the nature of sacrament as it is articulated in the objectivist model. Instead of sacraments acting as the primary mediators between nature and the divine, a subjectivist view understands humanity as communicating with God directly, and the sacraments are a demonstration of giving thanks for the love of God. Sacrament, in this model, is a “festive expression” of the Spirit moving freely in and through human interactions. Defining sacraments in this way limits them to their anthropological and ritual meaning. Chauvet describes this type of sacramental theology as understanding its role as “[transmitting] grace, already given by God, into daily life.” Consequently, sacraments are simply responses to God, their only requisite being that they were mandated by Jesus.

In reaction to these insufficient models, Chauvet reflects theologically on the sacramental model proposed by the Second Vatican Council. This model proposes a triangular structure, demonstrating the dual movement between God, sacrament, and humankind. God communicates God’s self directly to humanity through the movement of the Spirit, as well as through the sacraments (with Christ and through the Spirit). The sacraments are the “summit of the life sanctified by God’s grace and the revelatory expression (the sign) of this sanctification.” The Second Vatican Council’s proposal is significant for Chauvet, as it brings the previous models out of a linear and into a triadic conception of sacramental theology in which humanity, God, and sacrament participate in giving and receiving grace. This model is the foundation of his argument for a renewed ap-
One of the most important points of Chauvet’s thesis is a post-modern linguistic philosophy. He disproves the traditional conception of language that is understood as created by humans a posteriori, that is, as a tool that human beings create after they experience reality, thereby unrelated to their existence in and conceptions of reality. Chauvet adamantly rejects this model, claiming that without language, “reality would be left to its raw factualness and would be only a chaos or a meaningless jumble.” Therefore, he proposes an understanding of language as mediating reality to individuals, and through which a person constructs reality. From this view, a person never experiences reality in a pure state, in the absence of the influence of language. Chauvet claims that “it is in and by language that human beings are constituted as subjects” precisely because language is not merely an instrument that humans create, but rather the very way in which they are formed in the world. People of all ages exist in this “womb” of reality at the service of language; bombarded with reality through the words that express and give it meaning.

Words are assigned to and give meaning to objects; they possess connotations agreed upon by a particular culture in history. Further, as the building blocks of language, words are that which enables us to perceive the world around us and assign meaning to it, and yet at another level, language adds a tensile and metaphorical language to reality. In other words, the way in which we describe the world around us is not single layered, but multi-layered, forming a complex reality of images and metaphors through words that change frequently based on our individual and communal experiences. Chauvet defines symbolic order as, “the coherent ensemble of social, cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical, political values…[that] form a coherent world [in which] every element of universe, society, individual life has meaning only by finding its place…in it.” Words constitute and influence a priori the meaning that humans give to this symbolic order, which is an interconnected web of social fabric that changes with history. Language, in effect, possesses the ability to give and take away meaning from this framework, shaping our very experience. It is now clear that language acts not only as a lens in which humans conceive of the world, but also as the sole means for creating (or perhaps distorting) the world around them. Chauvet’s understanding of language leads him to the conclusion that life is symbolic, and, therefore, the Christian community is also symbolic. An essential element to the symbolic order of the Christian community is sacrament. This is due to the fact that sacraments represent the material that they take on, as well as an idea, or many ideas, that are beyond the material object. For Chauvet, sacraments are central to the Christian symbolic reality. But yet they do not stand alone; Chauvet sees a deep connection between sacraments, scripture, and ethics. All three are required for Christian identity and experience.

Encountering the sacraments is central to Chauvet’s major claim to a fully-lived Christian iden-

8 Ibid, 3-4.
9 Ibid, 13.
10 Ibid, 7.
11 Ibid, 14.
tity. In order for a Christian to live in this way, she must be a member of the church. Chauvet envisions the church as a sacramental representation of the fullness of Jesus’ person and ministry. Church, for Chauvet, is the expression of the reign of God, and because of this, it is sacramental. It is through the church that Christian life can continue to live out Jesus’ message. In order for the Christian to be a full and active member of the church, that is, participating in the reign of God, he must seek to live out certain identifying marks of conversion. Regarding this, Chauvet claims:

It is in the church that faith finds its structure because the church is in charge of keeping alive, in the midst of the world and for its good, the memory of what [Jesus] lived for and why God raised him from the dead: memory through the Scriptures, read and interpreted as speaking about [Jesus] or being his own living word; memory through the sacraments, recognized as being his own salvific gestures; memory through the ethical testimony of mutual sharing, lived as an expression of his own service to humankind. The three marks of Chauvet’s Christian identity as lived in the sacrament of the church are scripture, sacraments, and ethical action. No longer can the definition of a Christian be limited to one who simply professes a creed. Chauvet’s definition of Christian life necessitates their encounter with the world and places strong demands on the individual believer. I will now turn to the particular meaning of Chauvet’s three marks of ongoing conversion of the individual Christian living in the sacramental church.

First, Chauvet discusses the importance of encounter with scripture. Chauvet identifies scripture as the “unfolding of the apostolic church’s confession of faith,” and thus incorporates the Christian tradition that seeks to interpret or react to the canon of Scripture. In this sense, Christians must be formed in the biblical narrative as well as theologians, saints, and other Christian literature. Chauvet believes that these supplemental texts help to illuminate the meaning found in scripture, and are therefore essential to the Christian encounter with scripture.

The second mark of Christian identity is sacrament. Most important for this mark are the primary sacraments of initiation, baptism and Eucharist. Sacraments also include, however, “everything that pertains to the thankfulness which the church expresses to God.” Understood in this way, prayer is included in this mark. While Chauvet gives precedence to baptism and Eucharist, he understands the importance of sacramental actions and objects as meaningful to the Christian life. These various actions have been traditionally referred to as “sacramentals.”

The third mark of Christian identity in the church is the ethical dimension. The ethical, for Chauvet, includes all actions, personal, and social done in the name of the gospel (and therefore for humanity). It seems that human action is particularly significant here, and Chauvet also makes the claim that ethics seeks to eradicate social sin. Most intriguing about his ethical claim is his assumption that ethical behavior that promotes the gospel message is also done for the sake of humanity. Sin is not simply an individual’s breach of relationship with God, another, or himself, but can occur at the communal level. Chauvet makes the theological assumption that the teleology of the human person is to be in relationship with God. It is this very point from which we can transition to the life and writings of Flannery O’Connor. Although she was interested in creating fiction, her aim is similar to Chauvet’s— to engender engagement with God that is formed by symbolic language used to create a Christian identity based on the interplay among scripture, sacraments, and the ethical life.

Flannery O’Connor was a Roman Catholic woman raised in rural south Georgia in the mid-twentieth century. She is most famous for her fiction, particularly her short stories, and “occasional prose” on the meaning and aim of fiction. It is primarily through her personal reflections on fiction that we can gather her theological thought. Predominantly through the text Mystery and Manners, we can conclude that Flannery O’Connor’s theological convictions had a significant bearing on her approach to writing. Her work may be seen as exemplifying all three of Chauvet’s marks for Christian identity and offers the additional mark of aesthetics. This aes-

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12 Ibid, 29.
13 Ibid, 28.
14 Ibid, 29.
15 Ibid, 30.
16 Ibid, 31
17 This term is taken from the text Mystery and Manners, a collection of her various writings and lectures on the aim and meaning of fiction.
theological dimension proposes a unique window into the lived Christian life.

Although Flannery O’Connor and Louis-Marie Chauvet wrote in very different contexts and were influenced by different theologies, they both sought to express the importance of language as symbol (not simply as sign), and to promote the meaning of Christian identity as involving engagement with scripture, sacraments, and ethics. In order to demonstrate the strong parallel between these two figures, we will now turn to O’Connor’s symbolic approach to writing.

In O’Connor’s lecture titled “The Nature and Aim of Fiction,” she makes very clear her use of symbolic language in fiction. She says, “I think for the fiction writer himself [sic], symbols are something he uses simply as a matter of course. You might say that these are details that, while having their essential place on the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction.”

In the same way that Chauvet conceives of language as a womb from which the human person conceives of and creates reality, O’Connor speaks from her purview, a Roman Catholic in the South, and creates a world that reflects the meaning of Christian life that relies on an encounter with sacraments and scripture, and ethical action in response to that encounter. Her characters, although bound by time and place, transcend their characteristics because they act as symbols for expressing the meaning of Christian life. The ideals that Christianity offers, believes O’Connor, is the lived fulfillment of the human person. Her theology is strongly influenced by the incarnation, and her fiction, therefore is incarnational. In effect, because of her Christological and sacramental imagination, her theological message also has a very strong anthropological focus. That is, to fully embrace her belief in living out the fulfillment of the purpose of humanity, one must be Christian. Flannery O’Connor makes clear her “bias” in writing fiction. “I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that.” Flannery O’Connor’s theological beliefs are the primary starting point for her fiction. Her language, characters, and plots are all, in effect, reflections of her Christian ideals. As she says so eloquently, “The writer’s business is to contemplate experience.” Although her type of writing that encourages contemplation of the human experience, does not please all readers, O’Connor understands that she cannot write for the “tired” reader, who desires to “read something that will lift up his [sic] heart.” She believes, however, that being a writer is a vocation, something that God has given her as a gift. As she writes fiction from her unique perspective, which she defines as manners, she also demands that her art be embedded with the symbols that point to a greater mystery. Manners, for O’Connor, are the way in which she, a Southern, Roman Catholic woman conceives of proper living. There is a strong sense in her writing that she has strong opinions about the human condition, and the correct way to live out the goal and fulfillment of the human person. She believed that the South is somewhat of a seedbed for understanding the way to live a Christian life through manners, and she herself believed in the very real and yet transcendent mystery of God. These two concepts come together in her fiction to represent an art form produced with symbolic language and ideas, transcending their immediate meaning, and describing the ways in which humans interact with (or fall away from) the divine.

One of the best ways in which readers draw theological meaning from O’Connor’s is from objects that add surface meaning to the development of her short stories, as well as deeper theological meaning. An example of this symbolic language is the beginning of Mrs. Turpin’s conversion in O’Connor’s short story, “Revelation.” In this story, Ruby Turpin has led her entire life believing that she is superior to African Americans and those who are...

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19 “O’Connor’s description of art as incarnational can be described as religiously rooted in her understanding of the Incarnation of Christ; her vision is ordered by the images of creation and the Incarnation.” Susan Srigley, Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 17.
20 An incarnational Christology emphasizes the importance of the incarnation for salvation. The very act of Jesus becoming human changes the very ontology of humanity. That is, humans exist in a different way, with a renewed purpose as a result of the incarnation.
21 Flannery O’Connor, Mystery and Manners. 32.
22 Ibid, 84.
23 Ibid, 47.
24 Ibid, 81.
25 Ibid, 103.
A strong sacramental life is also encouraged in Flannery’s Christian identity. She herself was a faithful Catholic, who frequently received the sacraments. Some of her short stories included explicitly Catholic sacraments, and most often are themes on baptism and Eucharist. Also, it is possible to argue that reading her fiction possesses a sacramental character in the way that Chauvet defines “sacramental.” In this sense, in light of O’Connor’s recognition that her writing was God’s gift to her, the act of writing must have been a sacramental experience for her. The very language that she used has also been referred to as sacramental in character. Richard Gianonne, a prominent O’Connor scholar agrees and states that she, “Sought nothing less than a sacramental language that rests in the work and in the will of God.”

The third mark of Chauvet’s Christian identity, ethics, is also found throughout O’Connor’s literature. Susan Srigley is convinced of O’Connor’s moral theology infused in her stories. O’Connor’s ability to communicate ethics through story is rather similar to the narrative approach of the biblical literature. Through mythos, that is, story, O’Connor conveys the value of ethical behavior. She is not interested, however, in limiting her vision to how humans should act. As we have seen, her primary vision involves making her readers more aware of the mystery of God and how they are in relationship with God. O’Connor finds that the biblical narrative is useful for forming the moral code in a more profound way than natural law. She therefore includes moral and immoral characters in her stories in order to demonstrate their implications, which she feels is more effective than reiterating church teaching.

Even when Flannery O’Connor unambiguously includes the marks of Christian identity into her writing, it is not in an explicitly apologetic way. Her writings are not reiterations of


27 The many references to scripture, both explicit and implicit in O’Connor’s work are too extensive to enumerate here. An example of her use of scripture implicitly is found in the short story, “Parker’s Back,” in which O. E. Parker falls off of a tractor, setting both the tractor and a nearby tree on fire and leading him to a conversion of sorts. This seems rather similar to the traditional belief in Paul’s conversion on his way to Damascus. Other explicit references to scripture are throughout her stories, and often times are from the voice of Southern evangelical preachers. For more of O’Connor’s short stories, see The Complete Stories of Flannery O’Connor. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971).

the Catechism, but offer an aesthetic dimension to the Christian life and thought, which I argue is just as essential as the other three. In fact, as quoted before, Chauvet claims that a culture is created through symbolic language. His description of symbolic reality includes the aesthetic, but he does not include it in his definition of Christian identity. It is at the level of the aesthetic that O’Connor offers the most to the Christian life. Although she may agree with Chauvet on the necessity of scripture, sacraments, and ethical actions, that she expresses these in her fiction demonstrates how essential aesthetics are in Christian conversion. The very encounter with art offers a unique experience to the Christian life, and can and does enrich it. Aesthetics, and O’Connor’s work specifically, re-imagines Christian life as living a scriptural, sacramental, and ethical life. I argue that because O’Connor’s fiction is accessible to all people, not simply Christians, she reaches out to those who may be unfamiliar with Christianity (and especially with the enriched and full Christian life to which she prophesies!) in a way that the scriptural, sacramental, and ethical do not. Through art, O’Connor meets those who may be expecting to encounter an entertaining short story with interesting characters and possibly plot twists, and what they find instead is an encounter with God and what it means to be truly Christian.

Flannery O’Connor’s theology was strongly influenced by Thomas Aquinas, particularly through the theological lens of Jacques Maritain. She uses the Thomistic phrase, “art is a value of the practical intellect.” This means that O’Connor insists that the practice of art is intimately connected with reason and virtue. While this may seem to be a somewhat dry approach to aesthetics, it clearly results in a powerful symbolic and sacramental fiction. Her use of the grotesque effectively grabs the reader’s attention without the intent of evoking sentimentality or the obscene. Her stories are true art in that they utilize common, everyday experiences in such a way that the reader questions the meaning of life, and encounters a mystery that O’Connor considers to be the purpose and fulfillment of the human life – Christian life.

In conclusion, it seems that Chauvet’s sacramental theology of the late twentieth century is brought to life by Flannery O’Connor’s sacramental, scriptural, and ethical themes. Most important, O’Connor offers an additional mark to Chauvet’s triadic model for Christian identity. O’Connor wrote in the mid-twentieth century and was influenced by Thomas Aquinas and her social context, the rural South. Although somewhat unexpectedly, Flannery O’Connor can be seen as demonstrating the beauty of Chauvet’s claims to Christian life, and Chauvet systematically describes the theology that O’Connor embeds in her fiction. Because O’Connor’s sacramental approach to fiction was so unique, theologians will continue to return to her work to discover more meaning from the mystery written in the form of manners, for O’Connor offers myriad images in an attempt to bring imaginative participation into the symbolic order. She presents a unique and powerful form of the Christian life that is holistically focused on the scriptural, sacramental, and ethical.

In one of her lectures on the nature of Catholic novelists, O’Connor elucidates her approach to fiction: “…The fiction writer who [sic] writes neither for everybody, nor for the special few, but for the good of what he [sic] is writing.” This is essential for understanding Flannery’s work. She is not attempting to develop an ethic, or an ecclesiology, or a sacramental theology. However, all of these ideas (and more!) are embedded in her work. The “good” of which O’Connor is writing is “good in itself [because it] glorifies God because it reflects God.”

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34 See footnote 10.
35 Susan Srigley Flannery O’Connor’s Sacramental Art. 25. Srigley details the ways in which Flannery O’Connor was influenced by Maritain, especially his philosophy of art.
36 Flannery O’Connor. Mystery and Manners. 81
37 Ibid. 147.
38 Ibid, 171.
39 Ibid, 171.
The principal image of the resurrection in the Eastern iconographic tradition is not a depiction of a post-Easter scene found in the Gospels. Nor is it an image of Christ striding forth from a now-empty tomb. Paradoxically, the primary Easter image among the churches of the East is a depiction of Holy Saturday, an image of the secret work of Christ. Christ, already surrounded by the Resurrection light, stands among the dead. Still displaying his wounded hands and feet, Christ is pulling Adam and Eve from their own tombs, holding their wrists as they appear to awaken from a deep slumber. Around Christ are the patriarchs and prophets of the Old Testament, and the figure nearest to Christ is the Baptist, gesturing to the Mighty One. And finally, beneath Christ’s feet are two planks, the broken doors of Hades with discarded and useless locks, keys and chains. Suspended in a void and amidst this rubble, this debris of bondage, is the bound figure of Death.

The anastasis icon is the whole of the Good News depicted in a single image. Christ has trampled death by his own death and the dead are being drawn to new life. It is a depiction of what we proclaim and celebrate as Christians, and yet, it can seem so foreign to our thinking. The question arises: what can such an image, such a claim mean for the Christian and the world today? Does it not seem entirely too naïve and even irresponsible to preach Christ’s resurrection from death and suffering and our very participation in that event? These questions are at the heart of the Church’s struggle to re-learn and preach the Good News in the contemporary world.

As Alexander Schmemann notes in the opening lines of O Death, Where Is Thy Sting?, “in human consciousness the question about religion, about God, about faith, is directly related to the question of death.” This interconnection between faith and the question of death arises from the utter mystery of the reality which lies beyond death. There is no clear evidence, available to us by scientific or other means, whether positive or negative, regarding existence after death. A choice faces us in this mystery. How shall we view death? Death is an inevitability. It is the common experience of every human being and so every human being according to her capacity must answer this question. But any such answer requires a leap of faith; it requires believing in what cannot ultimately be known.

The world offers us two basic responses. The first group, which we will call the religious, argues that death is the natural end of life, and indeed can be felt throughout life in the form of suffering. However, if suffering and death permeate our existence it is only because, on the ‘other side’ lies our true, immortal existence. This world is full of sorrow and so we must die daily to it so that in the end we may live in the freedom of eternity.

The other camp exists as a rejection of this religious view. Has not the unknown world beyond death stripped this world of the here-and-now of its value? In order to preserve the value of the here-and-now the other world must be rejected. But now, with eternity cast aside, how can this world go on having any meaning? Precisely by denying eternity, death has loomed all the larger, only now it is no doorway to be embraced but the inevitable point of destruction for this here-and-now existence. Schmemann summarizes the two worldviews:

On the one side it seems there is faith in a Creator-God – and at the same time, the thirst to depart from this God-created world; and on much in common with Christianity and so they often ‘blend’. Schmemann frequently alludes to the fact that both types have suffering and liberation and their relation to death. Finally, I will address the role of liturgy in light of the preceding reflections.
the other side there is an affirmation of the world, yet a world that is horrible in its meaninglessness, for the one who alone has the possibility of using and enjoying this world – man – is in this world an accidental guest, destined for total annihilation.\textsuperscript{3}

Between these two sides we face a terrible choice: abandon this life and embrace the meaning of eternity, or abandon eternity and embrace the meaninglessness of this life.

It is only in contrast to these two views that the Gospel message and the Christian vision of death can be adequately understood. The temptation is to force Christianity into one of the other two categories. Either Christianity is a religion among other religions seeking to prepare us to die well and so live on in an eternal existence, or Christianity is essentially this-worldly and can dispense with all talk of heaven and the afterlife (we shall return to this view of Christianity below). In truth, however, Christianity says something incomprehensible to the wisdom of eternity and the wisdom of the ‘here-and-now’, for Christianity declares boldly with Paul that, “the last enemy to be destroyed is death…” (1 Cor 15:26).

Death, in Christian faith, is no natural end for the human person. It is not to be embraced as an escape from trouble or merely held-off for as long as possible while we do the work of living. Death is an enemy to be defeated, an unnatural figure worthy of our animosity.

Perhaps the most moving testimony of the Christian abhorrence for death is revealed when Christ weeps for Lazarus. Here we do not find the embrace of death that we find in Plato, who says, “those who rightly love wisdom are practicing dying, and death to them is the least terrible thing in the world.”\textsuperscript{4} Christ offers no comforting platitudes; he “does not say all those things we do in our pathetic and uncomfotting attempts to console.”\textsuperscript{5} Christ becomes “perturbed and deeply troubled,” a somewhat innocuous translation for the disturbance Lazarus’ death causes him. Indeed, this Gospel story should cause our own discomfort. It is noteworthy that the story appears in John’s Gospel where the serenity of Christ so often rivals the serenity of Plato’s wise man. But here, in this scene, we find that Christ becomes “perturbed” twice, first at the grief of Mary and again before Lazarus’ tomb. Christ has, verses earlier, declared “I am the resurrection and the life; whoever believes in me, even if he dies, will live,” (Jn 11:25) and yet now he stands before Lazarus’ tomb weeping.

Christ offers us no teaching on the immortality of the soul and so there is a temptation to think Christianity into a here-and-now worldview. After all, as we have just seen, Christ weeps for Lazarus’ death. If Christ preached an afterlife would he not “rejoice” at the liberation of Lazarus’ soul? And since he does not, he surely fits into that camp which rejects eternity for this world in which death is a regrettable and natural end. In a certain sense this line of reasoning is admissible, but it ignores the remarkable words spoken by Christ. Yes, Christ offers tears of grief and is disturbed by the death of Lazarus. He offers no words of comfort, but he does offer words of authority: “He cried out in a loud voice, ‘Lazarus, come out!’ The dead man came out, tied hand and feet with burial bands, and his face was wrapped in cloth. So Jesus said to them, ‘Untie him and let him go’” (Jn 11:43-44).

We have in this Gospel scene an anticipation of the great work of Christ in his passion, death and resurrection. Christ’s word frees Lazarus from the bonds of death. In the Paschal Mystery, Christ breaks the chains with which Death had bound us, and binds Death in turn. In the very defeat of his suffering and death, in the very midst of the deepest abysses of Hades where God is not praised, Christ has vanquished suffering and Death. In the prayers of the Byzantine liturgy for Holy Saturday we find a clear recognition of the victory won in Christ’s death, a verbal expression of the \textit{anastasis} icon,

When thou, immortal Life, didst humble Thyself unto death, through the glory of Thy divinity Thou didst destroy Hades. And when Thou didst raise the dead from the bowels of the earth, all the heavenly powers exclaimed: ‘O Christ God, O Giver of life, glory be to Thee!’\textsuperscript{6}

And again:

The hosts of angels were amazed and dazzled as they beheld Thee, O Saviour, among the dead, and destroying the power of

\textsuperscript{3} Ibid., 19-20.
\textsuperscript{5} \textit{O Death}, 25.
\textsuperscript{6} \textit{The Byzantine Missal}.
death, and raising up Adam with Thee, and releasing all the souls from Hades.\textsuperscript{7}

With the repetition of these prayers characteristic of the Byzantine liturgy, it is appropriate that the psalm recited immediately before the Gospel reading is the psalm 68 (67), a psalm of Yahweh’s victory:

Let God arise, and let His enemies be scattered: and let them that hate Him flee from before His face.

As smoke vanishes, so let them vanish away;

As wax melts before the fire, so let the wicked perish at the presence of God.

And let the just feast and rejoice before God: and be delighted with gladness.\textsuperscript{8}

Does this not challenge us? Have we dared to consider ourselves among the just rejoicing in God’s victory? It is by no means an easy task to embrace the joy of the Good News, indeed, it so often seems entirely counter-intuitive, irrational, and naïve. Schmemann puts before us a poignant question, which so accurately captures our own hidden thoughts, …how can we\textit{ not} recognize the lordship of all that has become normal, the rule of life, with which man has long ago come to terms, against which he has ceased even to protest and about which he has ceased even to be concerned in his philosophy, the enemy with which he seeks to find a compromise both in his religion and his culture?\textsuperscript{9}

Is this not true? Have we not tired of any protest against death (for it strikes us as utterly futile) and instead seek pathetic compromises? We pray desperately for death to hold off its inevitable triumph over us, but we do not have the strength to defy death. In our more thoughtful moments we may come to recognize that this fear of death, which consists only in a desire to hold off death “a little longer,” is itself a dreadful state. And so we seek, in our philosophies and religions, to resolve ourselves for death, to prepare for a fitting death. And yet, as we have seen, the Good News stands against all of this compromise and resolution to death, “for in essence Christianity is not concerned about coming to terms with death, but rather with the victory over it…[if this is not the case], then I repeat, the whole of Christian faith is meaningless, for the apostle Paul said: ‘If Christ has not been raised then…your faith is in vain’ (1 Cor 15:14).”\textsuperscript{10}

Christ’s resurrection, the bedrock of our faith, demands much from us. For our faith to prove true we must embrace an incredible joy, a prophetic kind of joy incomparable to the joys offered by the world. Christians must embrace the miraculous joy of Easter, the joy of a world yet to come. Sergius Bulgakov writes,

When the doors are opened, before the Sign of the Cross, and during the singing of the exultant Paschal hymn, we enter into the Church all gleaming with lights, and our hearts are flooded with joy, for Christ is risen from the dead. And then the Paschal miracle is performed in our souls. For we ‘see the Resurrection of Christ.’ ‘Having purified our senses,’ we see ‘Christ shining,’…then we forget where we are, we pass out of ourselves, time stops, and we enter the ‘Sabbath rest of the People of God’ (Hebrews 4:9-10). In the radiance of the white light of Easter, earthly colors are dimmed, and the soul sees only the ‘unapproachable light of the Resurrection’; ‘now all things are filled with light, heaven and earth and hell.’ On Easter night it is given to man to experience in advance the life of the age to come, to enter into the Kingdom of Glory, the Kingdom of God.\textsuperscript{11}

There is always the danger, of course, that such Good News collapses into a “honey-sweet” message, which preaches a blind optimism, a consolation to (or an avoidance of) death and suffering. It is especially in the contemporary world, with humanity stratified between the seemingly powerful and the powerless, the oppressors and the oppressed, that such Good News serves only to maintain the status quo. It can appear from such a view that “classical” Christianity, the Gospel of Christ’s Resurrection, is another religion like all others. It offers only another escape, another consolation to the tears and toils of life by focusing our attention on a mythical heaven where there are no such toils and all tears shall be wiped away.

\textsuperscript{7} Ibid. It is noteworthy that many iconographic depictions of the \textit{anastasis} include the angelic host following Christ into Hades.

\textsuperscript{8} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{9} \textit{O Death}, 27.

\textsuperscript{10} Ibid., 28.

There is a legitimate rejection of this kind of Christianity which offers only cheap consolation. However, there is a profound mistake in such “de-mythologizing”, because in so doing one has constructed another kind of religion one which offers its own view of death and its own cheap consolations. Schmemann writes,

[Secularism] is, in fact, itself a religion, and as such, an explanation of death and a reconciliation with it. It is the religion of those who have tired of having the world explained in terms of an ‘other world’ of which no one knows anything…Secularism is an ‘explanation’ of death in terms of life…Life ends with death. This is unpleasant, but since it is natural, since death is a universal phenomenon, the best thing man can do about it is simply to accept it as something natural. As long as he lives, however, he need not think about it, but should live as though death did not exist.12

In the end it appears that the secular, this-worldly, view is itself a religion. Good health, the sustaining of this life (because there is nothing else) and the avoidance of death are the central goals. Disease and decay are combated with medicine and other treatments for as long as possible. Hospitals attest to the power and success of this worldview, but betray its weakness in the manner in which death, a common hospital occurrence, is an anaesthetized affair. Death is the unfortunate limit of all healing and must be hidden from society. Our elderly are put in nursing homes away from the healthy and youthful. Our funeral homes appear like houses, all in an effort to hide and domesticate death.

In politics and economics as in health care, the secular encourages combat against the forces of suffering. However, precisely in a demythologized worldview, there arises a new class of heroic figures who defy death and suffering in their work for “the future” or “the cause”. In her commentary on letters of political prisoners and their parallels with Jesus’ farewell discourse in John’s Gospel, Dorothee Soelle finds a common thread. She writes, “In their letters appears an almost painful sense of self-confidence, the superiority of those who die for a just cause…They know their lives will conquer the death of being forgotten.”13 Soelle, however, can find no place for the senseless and fruitless suffering of innocents. Without a cause for which to suffer, suffering has no meaning.

Soelle offers an incredibly powerful vision of Christianity stripped of its “mythical heavens,” which is now able to work for the relief of suffering. It is precisely by rejecting Christ’s defeat of death, and the immortal life offered therein, however, that Christianity is left impotent. Any vision of suffering constructed solely from the resources of this world inevitably leaves a portion of humanity outside “liberation”. Inevitably there will be those who cannot suffer and die for a cause. There will be those who cannot look back on a life well lived, and in their moment of death or their life of suffering, what Good News can we offer? How can their sufferings find meaning? What future can the dying and the dead work for when they no longer have the strength to work? It is precisely here that Christianity can and must preach the Good News. Christianity must retain for itself a message which can be spoken to those who suffer senselessly, for those who cannot “overcome” their suffering in the name of a cause. Christianity rejects the liberation of the majority at the expense of the minority. Christianity rejects the vision of a human utopia temporally out of reach for the weak and powerless. Christianity rejects the apparent sufficiency of a society which claims to be “mostly just”. Schmemann writes,

…to live in a cosmic cemetery and to ‘dispose’ every day of thousands of corpses and to get excited about a ‘just society’ and to be happy! – this is the fall of man. It is not the immorality or the crimes of man that reveal him as a fallen being; it is his ‘positive ideal’ – religious or secular – and his satisfaction with his ideal.14 Christianity embraces the message of liberation, but Christianity’s vision of liberation extends further than the world can conceive. It extends beyond the living to embrace the dead and the dying. We Christians do not bring a message primarily of help to the world. We bring a message of hope to a hopeless world.

It is particularly in the sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick that Schmemann sees the remarkable difference between Christianity and all forms of help and therapy. For Schmemann, Christian anointing is not primarily a remedy for disease;

12 Ibid., 96-97.
14 O Death, 100.
if that were the case we would rightly forgo anointing and simply hope in medicine. For Schmemann, anointing is a passage, an entrance into the life of the resurrected Christ. When we anoint we make the sick into a “martyr, a witness to Christ in his very suffering.” The anointed ones, in the midst of pain and travail, witness to the Life of Christ for they have already entered the Kingdom. Their lives have passed over into a realm where death and suffering have no power. It is the supreme paradox of Christian faith that Christ's victory and our deliverance are won in the midst of Hades. The Kingdom of God erupts in the Kingdom of death.

It is Schmemann’s great theme that this entry into the Kingdom is the very nature of liturgy, prayer and the sacraments in general. He writes, “The whole Liturgy is to be seen as the sacrament of the Kingdom of God, the Church is to be seen as the presence and communication of the Kingdom that is to come…” And it is this insight that offers Christians the means by which to confront the oppression and injustice of the world. Schmemann writes, “[The Eucharistic celebration] is the ascension of the Church to the place where she belongs in statu patriae. It is also her subsequent return to this world: her return with power to preach the Kingdom of God.” The Christian shares in the “divine, holy, pure, immortal, heavenly, life-giving mysteries,” and with a life already in communion with the eschatological Kingdom, can reject the Kingdom of death in the world. We are given the power to oppose all bonds of slavery, for our bonds have been broken. There is no guarantee that we will not suffer, but by the power of the Risen Christ, who has made death his royal highway, our sufferings may be our crowns of glory. Christ’s tomb has become the “fount of the Resurrection, a giver of life more splendid than Paradise, and more radiant than any royal chamber.” The Cross of his passion has become his staff of victory. And so, in our power or in our powerlessness we are made into martyrs, icons of the Risen Christ. Though we die, it is our great joy that Christ has trampled death by death. It is we who have been lifted from the tombs in the anastasis. It is we whose bonds have been broken. It is we who now join in the Easter salutation of the Christian East and proclaim to the world our unending joy: “Christ is Risen! Indeed He Is Risen!”

15 Ibid., 108.
17 Ibid., 96-97.
18 Byzantine Missal.
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