A Sacramental World — Sacramentality As The Primary Language for Sacraments

In an intervention at the special consistory in Rome in May 2001 Cardinal Godfried Daneels (of Mechelen-Brussels) stated that “the Western churches of established Christianity are passing through a profound crisis of sacramentality. . . . [L]iturgy risks being dominated largely by an excess of words or of being merely a way to recharge one's batteries for diakonia and social action.” What is missing, he argues, is “the proper Catholic conception of preaching, which is not primarily marketing rhetoric, and of diakonia, which is not mere philanthropy.” “We proclaim the word and we practice diakonia. But we also [must] guard the most precious treasure of the Catholic Church: liturgy and sacraments.”1 For Daneels this means preserving the historical and Christological dimensions of the sacraments — unique and particular elements that are constitutive of the celebration of Christian sacraments. The key that unlocks and unleashes the depth and value of any liturgy and all sacramental celebration is sacramentality. Liturgy and sacraments presume a sacramental worldview. Yet I would argue that sacramentality is in need of retrieval for the very survival not only of liturgy and sacraments but for Catholic Christianity itself.2 In an American context the phenomenon of the “mega-churches” reflects something of the same phenomenon and crisis. Emphasis on music, skits, “participation” by observation and on the emotional aspects of faith contribute to nothing less than a crisis for the survival of Christian churches which celebrate and value liturgy and

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2At the outset let me state that when I use the term “Catholic” I mean retrieving characteristic elements from Catholicism that can contribute to how sacraments and liturgy are regarded in all Christian communities that celebrate them.
sacraments. The sacramental and the symbolic are here jettisoned for the immediate and the ephemeral. Ongoing conversion to the gospel is replaced by the quick fix of self-help problem “solving.”

For me the cardinal’s words ring very true. They remind us of a key aspect of the way liturgy and life are correlatives, are intrinsically interconnected and mutually enriching. Liturgy and sacraments bear a heavy burden to be what they are — that is, signs of the way the divine is manifested in the human, of the sacred in our secular world, of how all that is of God is incarnated among us through Jesus Christ as we await “a new heaven and a new earth.” We do not live in “two different worlds,” the sacred and the secular, with liturgy and sacraments offering an escape from the mundane to the eternal. Rather we live in one world, called “good” in Genesis 1:3 and graced through Christ whose becoming human is the means whereby we humans become God (to paraphrase St Augustine). But we also live in an imperfect world, marred by the sin we call “original,” the effects of which are obvious all around us. It is this world with all its flaws and problems that is the stage for the enactment of liturgy and sacraments which themselves are the privileged means for us to experience the triune God alive and dwelling among us here and now on this good earth even as we also yearn for this world to pass away.

In liturgy and sacraments we use “daily and domestic things.” This phrase capsulizes what it means to experience one of the key principles on which liturgy and sacraments is based. We live in a sacramental world and it is through the liturgy’s use of the things of this world that we experience particularly “strong moments” of God’s self-disclosure. The strength of the liturgy as understood here is that it draws on our experience of God in all of life. It ritualizes that experience so that through the liturgy we can evaluate life’s flaws and problems, put them into perspective and in joy and hope transcend them, not so much that we escape from this world but rather deepen our experience of God in this world.

My thesis is as traditional as the catholic principle of sacramentiality and the sacramental economy; it is as challenging as is the demand to discover God in “worldly worship,” that draws on the

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3 Taken from David N. Power, Unsearchable Riches (New York: Pueblo Publishing Co. 1984) 96.

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world for its symbolism and that is at home in the world and among all who dwell in it. This world is the locus of where the incarnate God is experienced. It is there here and now that, because of Christ, our lives are supremely human and profoundly divine at the same time. My thesis is also truly catholic in the sense that it is faithful to Catholicism as a theological tradition and not a faith tradition that merely repeats asserted truths of the past in a fundamentalist way. It is not coincidental, I think, that among American authors it is the priest sociologists Philip Murnion and Andrew Greeley who emphasize that "sacramentality" is truly a Catholic principle, the loss of which imperils Catholic identity.\(^4\) It is about a catholic way of looking at life, not just a catholic way of doing liturgical ritual. And in the end that is one fundamental key to sacramentality and to sacraments — namely a sacramental world view.

I want to argue here that a major issue that needs rethinking and refurbishing in our day is appreciating sacramentality in general as the framework and ground of celebrating liturgy and the seven sacraments. This means viewing the words, symbolic gestures and actions conducted in our solemn assemblies as rooted in the life we live outside church buildings. In a sacramental world view the world in which we live is interdependent — all that dwell in it are part of God’s plan for us all. It is also a locus where God is revealed, disclosed and experienced. This means the world, humans and all creatures great and small, are all signs of God among us. It also means taking seriously “daily and domestic things,” for these are the tangible ways and means the church uses to experience and partake in the life of God both in liturgy and sacraments and outside of them in all of life. The words we speak as well as the gestures and symbolic actions we engage in in liturgy derive from everyday speech and actions. If liturgy is comprised of many languages, certainly one of its fundamental languages is the sacramental world in which we live. My premise is that “sacramentality” comes first; rituals of liturgy and sacraments derive from it. Then they return us to this graced world. The celebrations of liturgy and


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sacraments are integral to and integrating of the Christian life lived in a sacramental world.

**POST-VATICAN II WRITINGS ON SACRAMENTS**

A major revolution occurred in contemporary Roman Catholic sacramental theology when theologians capitalized on the seminal insights of Edward Schillebeeckx, Karl Rahner and Otto Semmelroth (among others) who focused attention on Jesus and the church as primordial sacraments.\(^5\) Spurred on by *Lumen gentium*’s statement that the church is “a kind of sacrament or sign of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind”\(^6\) much postconciliar writing on sacraments has referred to Christ and the church as “sacraments” and that these are the foundations for the celebration of all liturgy and the sacraments. Thus the ritual celebration of liturgy and sacraments has commonly been placed within a “foundational framework”\(^7\) that emphasized the role and action of Jesus and the church in the ritual celebration of sacraments. More recently, however, some theologians have taken to nuance these assertions, not to ignore or diminish them, but rather to make them more precise, to get behind them and to explore their core meaning more fully. Significant voices here include Edward Kilmartin,\(^8\) Louis Marie Chauvet\(^9\) and Kenan Osborne.\(^10\) In my


\(^6\) *Lumen gentium* 1: “Cum autem Ecclesia sit in Christo veluti sacramentum seu signum et instrumentum intimae cum Deo unionis totiusque generis humani unitatis . . .”


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estimation there has been a rhetorical and hermeneutical ease with which the phrases “Jesus as sacrament” and “the church as sacrament” have been used since the council. My own sense is that emphasizing Jesus and the church as intrinsic to ritual sacramental actions has been all to the good. After all this returns us to the Augustinian premise that Christ and the church are the *magnum sacramentum-mysterium*. The difficulty, however, is that such emphases when termed “sacraments” or “sacramental” can be a rhetorical or theological stretch. In effect what can happen is that the Tridentine teaching that (legitimately) emphasized seven sacraments as chief means of experiencing God’s grace remains the rhetorical and theological basis for talking about Jesus and the church. This is legitimate insofar as the seven sacraments had been so highly prized in Catholicism as ways of experiencing God in the here and now that to say that Jesus and the church were “sacraments” was to capitalize on conventional theological language about privileged signs and symbols of God’s action among us in our world and in our human lives.

However one possible difficulty with such terminology is that it can appear to emphasize the sacral character of seven sacraments as the means to transmit God’s grace and life. The framework here would be that in the mundane world in which we live we need the sacraments to transmit that which is sacred and divine. What may have been missed in the post-conciliar evolution of terminology is perhaps an unwitting lack of respect paid to the principle of sacramentality — that is, signs of what is both human and divine — that grounds any description of all liturgy, of the seven sacraments, of Jesus and of the church. Put somewhat differently, what I am suggesting is that perhaps the Tridentine and post-Reformation emphasis on the number, origin and efficaciousness of the seven sacraments may well have eclipsed the principle of sacramentality on which they were based. That is to say that the broad meaning of sacramentality, namely that God is disclosed and discovered here and now on earth and in human life is the ground on which sacraments per se are based. This means that *sacramentality* is a better

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10 *Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World*, especially chapters four and five, “Jesus and Primordiality” and “The Church as Foundational Sacrament,” 84–136.

11 Phrase adapted from Kenan Osborne in *Christian Sacraments*, p. 65 and *passim.*
term to describe the foundation for celebrating liturgy and sacraments, rather than to assert (with hermeneutical and rhetorical ease?) that Jesus and the church are “sacraments.” Prior to God’s blessings sending us forth from sacraments to do God’s work on earth is the prior theological substratum of sacramentality, namely, that there is a deep and rich continuity between what we do in human life before and after engaging in sacraments which grounds both the rituals themselves and how we name these rituals as sacraments. Hence my preference for using the phrase “strong moments” to describe what occurs in liturgy and sacraments. This is meant to underscore the continuity between sacraments and all of life; it is also meant to insure the intrinsic and essential role that sacramental celebration plays in insuring a Catholic vision of reality. 

**SACRAMENTALITY**

One way of expressing this is to say that all reality “is potentially or in fact the bearer of God’s presence and the instrument of God’s saving activity. . . . This principle is rooted in the nature of a sacrament as such, that is, a visible sign of the invisible presence and activity of God. Together with the principles of mediation (God works through secondary agents to achieve divine ends) and communion (the end of all of God’s activity is the union of humanity), the principle of sacramentality constitutes one of the central theological characteristics of Catholicism.” In light of this premise my argument is that Jesus, the church and the seven sacraments are best appreciated as particular and privileged expressions of a sacramental world in which God has revealed and continues to

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reveal God's very self through the material of human existence, set within the world as itself regarded as sacramental. By "sacramental" I want to underscore a premise that is fundamental to a Catholic world view which sustains the unity of both the divine and human and the sacred and the secular. By "sacramental" I also mean that God is both revealed and yet also remains hidden in this world and that any particular revelation of God in this world can never be totally complete or completely full. The sacramental world is the primary language of sacrament but all sacramentality both reveals and hides the complete reality of God whom we can experience fully only in the life to come. Sacramentality emphasizes how God is discoverable here and now; it also leads us to yearn for the fullness of our experience of God in eternity.

Notice, however, the precise phrase about "all reality" in the above definition — specifically that it "is potentially or in fact the bearer of God's presence and the instrument of God's saving activity. . . ." The caution evident in the phrase "is potentially" is important and much needed, lest an overly optimistic view of creation and created reality be presumed. This is where the helpful cautions of Kenan Osborne are important and welcome. In his most recent book Christian Sacraments in a Postmodern World Osborne cites Louis Marie Chauvet's assertion that the world and history are recognized as "the possible place of sacred history." Osborne then goes on to assert that the thesis of his new book concerns how "the possible place of sacramentality in the lived world at large provides a hermeneutical key, or better, an ontological key, for those involved in the sacramental actions of church life and, thereby, produces a meaningful self-understanding of sacramental Haecceitas."

Edward Kilmartin effectively argues that this kind of fundamental outlook corresponds to the more general comprehensive view of all created reality which prevailed throughout the patristic era and the early Middle Ages, namely, a world view in which salvation history began with creation. All creation, as created by God, bears the mark of God's love, especially humanity, the crown of creation.

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13 Quote from Louis Marie Chauvet, Symbol and Sacrament, 554, quoted in Christian Sacraments 67, emphasis added.
14 Ibid., 68.

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The systematic theologians of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries had the same basic outlook, namely, that the Word, who created the world, came in the flesh and established the sacraments to draw humanity into union with himself. At the same time they affirm that created reality when used in sacraments attains its full meaning. "It does not merely manifest the mystery of God's love but is employed by God to communicate [God's] self to believers in the special way signified by each sacrament. Hence, they describe the sacraments as a means of a holy exchange, a sacrum commercium."\(^\text{15}\) While one can legitimately assert that from the middle of the twelfth century theologians became concerned about points that sacraments shared in common and began to develop treatises on what came to be called de sacramentis in genere\(^\text{16}\) and to number sacraments as "seven," it is equally true that at the same time a Catholic world view respecting sacramentality in general was also sustained.

One key challenge today is therefore to retrieve the principle of sacramentality that was operative prior to Trent and which is a chief characteristic of Catholic sacramental theology. When it is eclipsed, and I would argue that recently in some sacramental writing it has indeed been eclipsed in favor of naming Jesus and the church as "sacraments," then the very premise that through materiality, the human, the fragile and the things of this earth we experience the divine, is itself eclipsed. It is not a giant step from this rhetorical leap to dichotomize what ought to be unified, for example to separate the sacred from the secular, rather than to see this world as graced in Christ yet also as an imperfect realization of God among us. The rhetoric of sacramentality is always "both . . . and" rather than "either . . . or." In a sacramental world all is both graced and in need of complete redemption. In an "either . . . or" framework sacraments offer escapes from the world and send us back to it charged to work more adequately in it for the cause of God's kingdom. In a sacramental world, it is the world itself that is, in the words of Gerard Manley Hopkins, "charged with the grandeur of / God. . . . / Because the Holy Ghost over the bent / World broods with warm breast and with / ah! Bright wings."

\(^{15}\)Edward J. Kilmartin, "Theology of the Sacraments," 158.


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ROLE OF LITURGICAL CELEBRATION OF SACRAMENTS

The principle of sacramentality presumes and needs the celebration of liturgy because the very doing of the liturgy itself makes a theological statement, or rather a number of theological statements, one of which concerns sacramentality itself. The world and all who dwell in it are termed "sacramental," meaning that the whole cosmos and all that dwell in it are regarded as not only reflecting God's glory but also in need of complete redemption. Simply put we need the perpetuation of Christ's paschal victory through sacramental liturgy in order to put the world into proper perspective as both grace-filled and flawed, as reflective of God's grace but also as standing in need of complete redemption. This is to suggest that regular engagement in sacramental liturgy prevents us from becoming too optimistic about the world — a temptation not always overcome in some contemporary approaches to what we have come to call "creation theology" and "creation spirituality." But when liturgy and sacraments are celebrated regularly and are regarded as essential to Catholic doctrine, then theologies and spiritualities of creation receive proper theological emphasis.

The very celebration of sacramental liturgy does a number of things among which are the following:

1) It substantiates the contemporary emphasis on the theology of creation and places it on a truly theological ground in that it always stresses that the things of this earth used in liturgy are from God's goodness. This is to say they are both natural symbols from God's providence (water) or the results of human manufacture from what the earth has produced (bread, wine). These are not only objects, they are the means we humans need to use in order to articulate our faith in the triune God. Sacramental liturgy regularly places on our eyes a prism through which to view creation and the world, a prism that is biblical and paschal. It is biblical in the sense that it makes us "see" the world as created and sustained by God as creator and redeemer. It is paschal in the sense that we "see" all things not through rose-colored glasses but through lenses that enable us to evaluate everything in life from the perspective of Christ's paschal mystery. Even in (shall I say especially in?) an incarnational world view, the world as sacramental means that even as we name its flaws we are confident in its final perfection from Christ's paschal victory.

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2) Sacramental liturgy prevents us from being pessimistic about the world and world events; it celebrates that a Christian approach to life is always optimistic. In the end “all will be well.” In the meantime we need sacramental liturgy to put the world into focus and perspective. Opportunities for experiences of hope abound in the celebration of sacraments — hope in the act of liturgy, hope derived from the act of liturgy with which to deal with and face human life.

3) Sacramental liturgy articulates our belief that we worship God through the things of this world. This means that sacramental liturgy is always both anthropological and cosmic; it articulates what we believe about the human person and the cosmos. Or better, through sacramental liturgy human persons put their lives and the world itself into perspective. We use “daily and domestic things” in liturgy, things which are both from creation and the result of human productivity, things which reflect back on the goodness, generosity and largesse of the God we worship. We use them to put order into (what is sometimes) the chaos of human life and to set us in proper relation with the world and all who dwell in it.

Take the Easter vigil as an example and the way the celebration is based on the use of water (a symbol found in nature) and bread and wine (symbols that are the result of human manufacture). From patristic through early medieval and later medieval authors the use of water was prized because underneath the act of washing in it God was said to work (inwardly) to effect within the person what was happening outside. They so initiated were washed exteriorly and were inwardly cleansed. It seems to me that even in such a rich theology of sacramental efficaciousness what may not receive sufficient emphasis is the fact that among all the elements on this earth, water is the only element without which we cannot live. This is to say that things can grow in water and they do not need soil; and that humans need fluids to sustain human life. The principle of sacramentality operative here is that the one element

17 What is perhaps the classic summary of this insight is from Hugh of StVictor who calls a sacrament “a corporeal or material element set before the external senses, representing by similitude, signifying by institution and containing by sanctification, some invisible and spiritual grace” (De Sacramentis Christianae Fidei P. IX, c.2; P.L. 176, 317b). Also see Thomas Aquinas, Summa Teologiae q.60 and 62.
from human life that sustains life is the very element we use in sacramental liturgy to signify and effect the life of grace that is from God. The use of water in baptism also articulates (among other things) our belief that God breathed on the waters in Genesis to order the pre-existing chaos. That same creation takes place amidst the chaos of our world and lives through the use of that same primal element when the dying and rising of Christ is made present and operative for those initiated into the faith by blessing and using water. This theology is amply reflected in the prayer to bless water in the baptismal rite.\(^\text{18}\) The combination of the use of this primal element and the proclamation of this prayer evidences that all liturgy is at once cosmic, biblical and paschal. Sacramentality grounds the sacrament of baptism; the liturgy of baptism enacts our belief in what both washing in water and water itself mean as gifts of God and the means through which we participate in (literally “take part in”) the good news of salvation by experiencing it and also by experiencing Christ’s paschal victory.

The same principle is operative in the use of bread and wine at the Eucharist. Among the many theological meanings of bread and wine blessed and shared is the meaning of bread and wine themselves — gift of the earth and the fruit of the vine. These gifts are shared in human life at table for nourishment and at the altar as the food of everlasting life. Once again the key here is the sacramentality of food and the human meal as this grounds the Eucharist as the sacrament of everlasting life.\(^\text{19}\) Both bread and wine derive from this good earth. But both require that humans plant, harvest and then engage in work to produce these foods. They are not “natural” symbols; they are manufactured symbols, whose very manufacture says something about the sacramentality of creation and the sacramentality of human work. This is to suggest that one element of a theology of the Eucharist emphasizes how bread and wine by their very being what they are as the “work of human hands” say something about the value which we can place on a

\(^\text{18}\) See *Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults*, n. 222 A, *Rite of Baptism for Children* 91.

number of things such as the value of human work, the sharing of a meal for human nourishment and the Eucharist as the food of everlasting life. It is the "daily and domestic" ritual of taking food with others which locates a rich theology of what the Eucharist means.\textsuperscript{20} It also suggests that human ingenuity and productivity in making bread and wine are part of what is brought to the Eucharist to be transformed along with human labor's result — the bread and wine themselves.

To my mind, then, among the things which the enactment of the Eucharist accomplishes is that bread and wine, taken and shared, are the regular ritual reminders of what it means to share in God's grace in all of human life. It is the liturgical taking of food and drink and the liturgical act of blessing food and drink that puts human dining into perspective and gives it its depth. This is to say that the very manufacturing of these foods and the ritual proclamation of the eucharistic prayer not only articulate what the sacrament of the Eucharist means, they also derive from the prior experience of sacramentality in human life when we use words and actions to communicate with each other and to sustain life. In both God is at work. The sacrament of the Eucharist articulates and specifies for believers that here and now God is operative in all of their lives. Sacramental liturgy thus provides the lens we need through which to view all of reality — a reality which is both sacred and secular, fully divine and fully human. One can legitimately say that a Roman Catholic contribution to understanding human life deriving from sacramental liturgy is that we live in a sacramental world that is interdependent in terms of persons, things, symbols (and their manufacture) as well as a sacramental premise that sees and finds God in the world. "Sacramentality" thus implies integration and experiencing God here and now in all of life as well as in what is yet to be in eternity.

For me the task is to make sure we view liturgy as a deep and strong ritual expression of the fact that God lives among us prior to, in and following upon sacramental engagement. The function of sacramental liturgy is less to bring to the world what we have experienced in the liturgy (as important as that truly is) than it is to underscore how what we do in liturgy derives from the world and


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everyday life, the liturgical ritualization of which helps us order our lives and our world once more in God's image and likeness. Sacraments are less doors to the sacred than they are the experience of the sacred in human life.

A DIALECTICAL VISION AND PERSPECTIVE

One advantage of the Catholic theological tradition is, in effect, the ability to place in a dialectical and sometimes complementary relationship themes that are in fact varied and which need to be juxtaposed (if not reconciled) and whose meaning needs to be explored together. With regard to sacramentality as a foundation for the celebration of liturgy and sacraments and as a perspective we can use to view all of life, there are at least three theological issues that deserve investigation.

God of Creation and Redemption. The very premise of sacramentality especially as it is articulated in various places in sacramental liturgy asserts that we believe in a God of the covenant who both creates and redeems. Sometimes these are treated separately; at other times these are placed in clear and abiding relationship. Significantly the Catholic liturgy frequently acclaims and names the God of both covenants as both creator and redeemer in its central prayers of blessing (e.g., prayer to bless water at baptism and the eucharistic prayer). An important contribution which Catholic liturgical theology can make to the theological premise of sacramentality is that proper weight be given to both these liturgical images and likenesses of God in the liturgy and to insure that these are intrinsically related. The creator God redeems and God's redemption extends to all creation. The celebration of sacramental liturgy thus is based on the sacramental principle that the God of creation and redemption is operative in all our lives.

Paradigms of Journey and Being at Home. Theology derived from the liturgy reflects the theme of pilgrimage on this earth — specified in Exodus and as this paradigm is reiterated through the scriptures — and the theme of being settled in a place by God's design exemplified in the search for the promised land. These scriptural images are central to how believers interpret their place on earth and the fact that God's chosen people is also a people on pilgrimage. A dialectic has been and needs to continue to be sustained in

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Catholic sacramental theology whereby we can legitimately work towards being “at home on the earth” at the very same time that we also engage ourselves in continuing the journey of life on this earth as God’s “pilgrim church on earth” (as we pray in the third eucharistic prayer). The theme of pilgrimage can be an especially appropriate reminder that we have here no lasting city and that ultimately we will be called from this good earth to a new heaven and a new earth. Yet the notion of being at home also reminds us to respect and revere the land on which we dwell in the sense that it is indeed “ours” if only for a time and that we are its stewards, fully responsible for its care and preservation in order to pass it on less ravaged for the “use” of the next generation. Placing such a sacramental lens on this earth is not always easy. One of the functions of the repeatability of sacraments is that they are regular reminders of “both” God’s grace here and now for us and for generations to come.

*Salvation Here and Hereafter.* A most helpful contribution of the admittedly relatively recent emphasis on both an incarnational and creation-focused theology and spirituality is their emphasis on experiencing salvation here and now in this world. At the same time, however, Christian sacramental liturgy images the fact that salvation may be partially (“already”) experienced here and now but that it is also something we will only experience fully in eternity forever (thus it is also “not yet”). This juxtaposition of themes is most helpful in order that Christian theology be faithful to the fullness of scriptural and traditional teachings lest such important themes of theology and spirituality be concerned only with the here and now and not with what we await, pray for and yearn for. For me the emphasis on the theological principle of sacramentality and the enactment of sacramental liturgy is most important here. The principle of sacramentality combines what has been accomplished and what is with what is yet to be and for which we have confident hope. One of the purposes of the enactment of sacramental liturgy is to articulate the underlying principle of sacramentality as this principle combines both incarnation with redemption and the already with the not yet. We have indeed been graced and redeemed in Christ; but as pilgrims on this good earth we await the full redemption Christ came to accomplish. We Christians have

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every right to be optimistic, but we ought not to be naive. The lens which sacramental liturgy places on our eyes helps us to keep many facets of sacramentality in a delicate and necessary balance. Among other things the enactment of sacramental liturgy serves this purpose.

My intention here has been a modest one, namely, to review and perhaps to revive a truly fundamental principle of all liturgical and sacramental activity as well as a central Catholic trait. Among other things, sacramentality holds in tension what is and what is not, that the human and the divine are inseparable in Christ and that both of these apparent polar opposites are totally interwoven in both the sacramental world and sacramental liturgy. Sacramentality should shape our vision of the _sacrum commercium_. It should ground its ritual enactment in sacramental liturgy.

Ronald J. Allen

Preaching and the Other

The emerging postmodern world is marked by a permeating respect for Otherness. Preachers encounter the motif of the Other in theology, philosophy, and literary theory.¹ Otherness enters our

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