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Liturgical Theology Seminar
Weekly Reflection Paper
February 21, 2012

As the bread is broken, we take time to ponder the holy mystery of The Eucharist. The host, which is the large wafer that the celebrant holds up, has become the body of Christ, and now is broken, symbolizing for us Jesus' broken body on the cross.¹

The fact that a major Episcopal congregation printed this explanatory note in its bulletin for Easter Sunday of 2010 illustrates that the method of allegorical interpretation of the liturgy which Enrico Mazza attributes first to the fourth-century mystagogues, particularly Theodore of Mopsuestia, and which became prominent in the influential commentaries of Germanus in the East and especially of Amalar in the West, is still alive. The identification of the fraction with the breaking of Jesus' body is an old one (Yarnold notes it in the fifth-century Peter Chrysologus)² and intuitively satisfying for many worshipers. It is also intensely uncomfortable for many liturgical scholars, particularly those influenced by Reformation traditions, for whom treating the eucharist as a repetition of the sacrifice of Jesus on the cross is deeply problematic.³ Howard Galley, one of the compilers of the 1979 *Book of Common Prayer*, notes with some chagrin that the choice of 1 Cor. 5:7-8 as the book's primary option for the fraction anthem had unintended consequences in reinforcing this interpretation: "What the rubrics do *not* envision is (a) that the period of silence be only as long as it takes to break the bread, and (b) that the broken bread be then held aloft, during or immediately after which the priest exclaims, "Christ our Passover is sacrificed for us."⁴

Most liturgical scholars—including me—would likely prefer to point to different interpretations for the fraction. It is, at its most basic, a functional act of preparation for

¹ Trinity Episcopal Church, Columbus, OH, "Service Bulletin for Easter Sunday 2010," April 04, 2010, http://www.trinitycolumbus.org/Order%20of%20Service/Rename_Order%20-%204,4,10.pdf.

² Edward Yarnold, *The Awe-inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the RCIA* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 235n33.

³ See, for example, Oliver K. Olson, "Contemporary Trends in Liturgy Viewed from the Perspective of Classical Lutheran Theology," *Lutheran Quarterly* 26, no. 2 (May 1974): 125ff.

⁴ Howard Galley, *The Ceremonies of the Eucharist: a Guide to Celebration* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1989), 118.

distribution; and it is part of the prototypical eucharistic action of Jesus, who took bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave it to his friends.⁵ In more symbolic theological terms, it is a symbol of unity, the body of Christ sharing in a single loaf, as in Paul and the Didache.⁶ It is a moment of revelation of the risen Christ, as at Emmaus.⁷ Like Mazza, we prefer biblical typology to a “theology of the mysteries” that identifies ritual moments in the liturgy with specific events in Christ’s passion.⁸ We might even point to John 19:36 to note with irritation that Christ’s body was specifically *not* broken during the crucifixion. Yet the identification of the fraction with the death of Christ is not so easily squelched. Although it was not even rubrically allowed in the previous 1928 prayer book, this ritual moment and its popular interpretation have become prominent enough for Episcopalians in the years since 1979 that Phyllis Tickle can refer to “the regularly-scheduled heartbreak of fraction” as one of those things that binds us together.⁹ What is going on here?

It is hard to find adequate terminology to discuss allegory and typology. For Mazza allegory has to do with the symbolic interpretation of *texts*, while typology has to do with the interpretation of *events* in salvation history.¹⁰ For Rorem typology is also associated with events, either past historical events or eschatological events yet to come; however, Rorem uses the word “allegory” in connection with the school of timeless, neo-Platonist-influenced interpretation associated with Pseudo-Dionysius.¹¹ As Taft notes, contemporary liturgists tend to use the words differently than did ancient writers, for whom “allegory” simply meant an extended metaphor: for modern exegetes, however, it is usually a pejorative term for interpretations seen as untenable, while “typology” is used for interpretations the commentator agrees with.¹²

Taft offers a useful and nuanced reflection on the value of both *historia* and *theoria*: his appreciative assessment of Germanus suggests that a genuine liturgical theology can involve more than one style of meaning-making. For Taft the danger is not so much in drawing connections between liturgical actions or texts and individual symbolic meanings, but in

⁵ Mark 14:22 and cognates; see also 6:41 and cognates.

⁶ 1 Cor. 10:16; Didache 9.

⁷ Luke 24:30.

⁸ Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: a Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age* (New York: Pueblo, 1989), xii.

⁹ Tickle, foreword to Louie Crew, ed., *101 Reasons to be Episcopalian* (Harrisburg, PA: Morehouse, 2003), vi.

¹⁰ Mazza, *Mystagogy: a Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age*, 11.

¹¹ Paul Rorem, *The Medieval Development of Liturgical Symbolism* (Bramcote, England: Grove Books, 1986), 12–16.

¹² Robert F. Taft, “The Liturgy of the Great Church: An Initial Synthesis of Structure and Interpretation on the Eve of Iconoclasm,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 34/35 (1982): 55n62, 60n72.

stopping with just one connection in any given instance. “The precise genius of metaphorical language is to hold in dynamic tension several levels of meaning simultaneously. . . . it is not the multiplicity of meanings but the attempt to parcel them out that can lead to an artificial literalism destructive of symbol and metaphor.”¹³ A given interpretation may be more or less “felicitous,” but the real problem lies in pinning down the multivalent activity of God into a single explanation: “one and the same eucharistic table *must be* at once Holy of Holies, Golgotha, tomb of the resurrection, cenacle, and heavenly sanctuary.”¹⁴ Such extraordinarily exuberant claims can be made for the liturgy only because of the activity of the risen Christ, who is the same then, now, and in the future; Taft’s discussion of the continuity of Christ’s presence (citing Talley on anamnesis) is particularly compelling.¹⁵

I am reminded of Joyce Ann Zimmerman’s contention that the “deep structure” of liturgy mirrors the deep structure of the gospel itself.¹⁶ If this is true, and if the same Christ who was active in past events of salvation history and who is still to come is also active in the church’s worship today, then there is in principle no limit to the symbolic meanings that can be generated through an act of liturgy. A reader-response orientation rather than an authorial-intent orientation might discover all kinds of meaning-making going on among worshipers, some of it according to the preferences of scholars, most of it not. As long as bread is both identified as Christ’s body and broken in worship, faithful worshipers will continue to be reminded of the crucifixion. As Taft would suggest, however, the issue lies not with the generation of that association but with its canonization as the *only* meaning of the fraction at the expense of the Didache’s gathered grain, the Emmaus theophany, the feeding of five thousand, the festive dinner party, and all the other myriad associations that arise from what Patrick Malloy calls this “hierophanic moment: an occasion when the Mystery is revealed in its complexity and richness.”¹⁷

¹³ Ibid., 74.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Robert F. Taft, *Through Their Own Eyes: Liturgy as the Byzantines Saw It* (Berkeley, CA: InterOrthodox Press, 2006), 138–40. I find his discussion of *taxis*, or order, somewhat less appealing—the downside of a totalizing hierarchical society under God and the emperor seems all too apparent—but he is an Eastern Christian speaking to an Eastern Christian audience, and perhaps this is an example of the “plurality of particularities.” Anglicanism has its own idiosyncrasies that I find congenial while others would not.

¹⁶ Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Liturgy As Language of Faith: A Liturgical Methodology in the Mode of Paul Ricoeur’s Textual Hermeneutics* (University Press of America, 1988). Zimmerman uses a phrase derived originally from the generative grammar of Noam Chomsky and taken up into the social sciences by Claude Lévi-Strauss. Linguistics no longer makes much use of the notion of deep structures, but the phrase is still an evocative metaphor.

¹⁷ Patrick Malloy, *Celebrating the Eucharist: A Practical Ceremonial Guide for Clergy and Other Liturgical Ministers* (New York: Church Publishing, Inc., 2007), 132.

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