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Sacramental Symbols in a Time of Violence and Disruption: Shaping People of Hope and Eschatological Vision

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SACRAMENTS

REVELATION
OF THE HUMANITY OF GOD

*Engaging the Fundamental Theology
of Louis-Marie Chauvet*

Edited by Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill

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Thus we cannot separate the metaphorical word and symbol; we can barely distinguish them. Since in the metaphor there is the possibility of becoming a symbol, thanks to the genius of the poet, there is in the symbol a metaphorical process of translation of meaning, even if, as we have attempted to say, the symbol is the conveyer of the real to the real. The category of "play" would be the most appropriate to account for the nature of the symbol. Thus the play between *logos* and *bios* allows us to understand that the symbol is more than language yet requires it constantly and dances with it.

CONCLUSION

The anthropological and philosophical approach to symbol can go beyond its ever-open frontier toward a theology of sacrament. For if the God of Jesus Christ is the Totally Other, he is also the Totally Near, and he is really in symbolic and sacramental relationship with us. Thus, it seems that the symbol is, according to its etymology, this concrete mediation, metaphorical and anaphoric, that allows us to navigate between worlds. *When the theologian becomes anthropologist*,⁴¹ this symbol-sacrament rediscovers its human roots, and when the anthropologist becomes theologian, passing through philosophy, the symbol-sacrament ontologically returns to its divine aim. For the symbol-sacrament is the witness of the "hypostatic union" of the divine and the human in Christianity.

People inhabit this earth symbolically. Spirit in the world: it is in the play, the back and forth between the sensible and the intelligible, between the *thinking* sense and the *sensing* thought, that the human person deploys his or her humanity.⁴² This "way of being" is therefore symbolic, as *symbolic* is the encounter of God and humans in the symbol-sacrament of which the body is the archi-symbolic place.⁴³ "The most spiritual takes place in the most corporal": this is the heart of Chauvet's theology. This "more spiritual" is God himself in this mystery of his self-communication, coming really "at the risk of the body" in sacrament.⁴⁴

⁴¹ Chauvet, *Approches scientifiques du fait religieux* (Paris: Beauchesne, 1997), 29–46.

⁴² Cf. Heidegger, *Le principe de raison* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962), 126ff.

⁴³ Cf. Chauvet, *Symbole et Sacrement*, 158f.; English, 151ff.

⁴⁴ Chauvet, "Une relecture de *Symbole et Sacrement*," leçon academic lecture given at Louvain, March 7, 2007, p. 12; *Les sacrements, parole de Dieu au risque du corps* (Paris: Ouvrières, 1997). Cf. Karl Rahner, *Traité fondamental de la foi* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1983), 139–50.

Sacramental Symbols in a Time of Violence and Disruption:

Shaping a People of Hope and Eschatological Vision

Judith M. Kubicki, CSSF

INTRODUCTION

The classic novel, *A Tale of Two Cities*, by Charles Dickens, opens with the following lines:

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair.¹

In penning this paradoxical description of France on the eve of the French Revolution, Dickens likens his own time, the mid-nineteenth century, to the earlier epoch he is describing. Many might think these words just as aptly describe our own twenty-first century. On the one hand, advances in technology, science, and medicine have paved the way for unprecedented opportunities for improving life and solving problems. On the other hand, threats of random violence perpetrated through terrorism and street violence undermine the ordinary citizen's sense of security, not only in war-torn countries, but in every corner of the globe.

¹ Charles Dickens, *A Tale of Two Cities* (USA: Modern Library, 2000), 3. Originally published in 1859.

But the violence we inflict on each other is only a part of the story. Environmentalists have identified humankind's exploitive, wasteful, and destructive relationship with the earth as the direct cause of growing environmental ills. Such woes threaten not only the well-being of life on the planet, but also the integrity of a sacramental system that speaks through the various elements of creation. Industrialized nations pursue strategies that put profit before conservation and squander the planet's resources for the benefit of a powerful minority. Such policies have also been identified as the root cause of human strife on every level of existence. Indeed, most of the world's conflicts spring from religious bigotry, greed, and fear of the stranger. Controversy continues unabated regarding the ways in which we deal with immigrants, illegal aliens, gays and lesbians, and others perceived to be living outside the boundaries of traditional cultural or social norms. On a more local or personal level, threats to security also include sudden loss of employment or health, natural disasters, and the day-to-day challenges of providing for one's family, including elderly parents.

Even a superficial knowledge of history, however, reminds us that disaster and violence of every imaginable kind have been a part of the human story from the very beginning. Indeed, pain and suffering are an intrinsic part of the human condition. But what perhaps makes the twenty-first century different from former times is that never before has it been possible to be aware so vividly and so instantaneously of the pain and struggles occurring not only in our own homes or neighborhoods, but also in places thousands of miles away. This is part of the price we pay for technological prowess and expertise. The pain both across the globe and across the street is accessible to our everyday awareness.

Nevertheless, within such a world of strife, fear, and disruption, Christians continue to celebrate God's promise of healing and reconciliation won for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. We do this in a particular, though not exclusive, way through rituals called sacraments. Much has been written about the sacraments, including their theological and pastoral significance for the life of the church. In the past, the task of traditional Roman Catholic sacramental theology has been to explain how the seven sacramental rites of the church celebrate the grace of Christ bestowed on persons of faith who receive one or more of the sacraments worthily. Focus was on the action of Christ, the role of the minister, and the faith of the individual believer and church community. All this is still within the purview of sacramental

theology. However, significant shifts have occurred as a result of the Second Vatican Council. This is particularly evident in the two council documents on the church. Article one of *Lumen Gentium* speaks of the church as "a sacrament—a sign and instrument, that is, of communion with God and of the unity of the entire human race . . ."² This same description of the church is repeated in article 9 of *Lumen Gentium* and again in article 42 of *Gaudium et Spes*. In other words, the council's first definition of church is church as sacrament, more specifically "as a *sacramentum mundi* ('sacrament of the world'), the visible sign of the 'saving unity' that embodies God's will and intention not only for humankind, but for creation itself."³

Such a vision of church suggests that what Christians do when they celebrate the sacraments is of critical importance, not only for the church's own self-realization, but also for a world torn by violence and disruption. Indeed, those who engage in the symbolizing activity we call sacraments are in some very real way being called to celebrate what Rahner has called "the liturgy of the world,"⁴ not in isolation from, but in communion with the global community and the cosmos.

The work of Louis-Marie Chauvet has contributed significantly to the post-Vatican II task of understanding the role of sacramental celebrations within the context of life in the contemporary world. And while his contributions are many, this essay will consider only two aspects of his thought. The first is his theological anthropology of symbol, and the second, related to it, is his focus on the paschal mystery as the starting point for developing a sacramental theology.

A THEOLOGICAL ANTHROPOLOGY OF SYMBOL

In his highly influential *Symbol and Sacrament*, Chauvet posits an understanding of the human person as both shaping and being shaped by symbolizing activity. His anthropology of symbol begins by looking at the root meaning of the Greek word *symbolon*. Its literal meaning meant "to throw together." It could also be translated as "gather

² Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) in *Vatican Council II: Constitutions, Decrees, Declarations*, gen. ed. Austin Flannery, inclusive language edition (Northport, New York: Costello, 1996), no. 1.

³ Nathan Mitchell, *Meeting Mystery: Liturgy, Worship, Sacraments* (New York: Orbis, 2006), 253.

⁴ See Michael Skelley, *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1991).

together," "hold in common," "exchange," "meet," or "converse."⁵ Chauvet explains it this way:

The ancient *symbolon* is precisely an object cut in two, one part of which is retained by each partner in a contract. Each half evidently has no value in itself and thus could imaginatively signify anything; its symbolic power is due only to its connection with the other half. When, years or even generations later, the partners or their descendants come together again to "symbolize" their two portions by joining them together, they recognize this act as the expression of the same contract, of the same alliance. It is thus the agreement between two partners which establishes the symbol; it is the *expression of a social pact based on mutual recognition* and, hence, is a *mediator of identity*.⁶

Today, Chauvet observes, the semantic field of the word "symbol" has been expanded to include every element (e.g., object, word, gesture, or person) that, exchanged like a password, enables either groups or individuals to recognize one another and identify themselves. In this same way, the many symbols celebrated in the sacraments—bread, wine, oil, fire, water, altar, crucifix, among others—mediate Christian identity and hence also the relationships within the community we call church.⁷ Celebrating sacraments by means of symbolic activity enables the Christian community to weave and reweave relationships and to negotiate both individual and communal identity. Another way of describing this dynamic is to say that by means of sacramental activity, individuals and/or groups of Christian believers are reconciled with one another and with God.

Furthermore, Chauvet makes it clear that the significance of a symbol does not lie in the object, word, gesture, or person understood as such. Rather, it is by means of an activity by which human beings exchange some object, word, gesture, or person that they are able to recognize one another and discover their own identity. In other words, there is no meaning hidden in a symbol waiting to be discovered. Rather, it is by means of the exchange between persons that a symbol

⁵ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1995), 112.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ See *ibid.*

mediates meaning. Gathered together in coherent patterns, multiple symbols provide a symbolic order that enables human beings as subjects to "build" themselves as they engage in building their world.⁸ The task of the contemporary church is to discover what the activity of "building our world" might actually look like, given the challenges facing us today.

THE PASCHAL MYSTERY

A second contribution Chauvet offers the study of contemporary sacramental theology is a method that begins with a consideration of the Easter mystery rather than the Incarnation. This may not at first seem unusual or surprising since the church has always celebrated Easter as the first among all feasts. In fact, in the early church, it was the only feast celebrated. However, as Chauvet points out, the gradual fragmentation of the paschal mystery into a multiplicity of feasts observed throughout the liturgical year created a situation that made it easy to forget the eschatological "today" as a memorial. Instead, multiple liturgical feasts came to be viewed as the observances of an anniversary of one of the events in the life of Christ. This approach tended to weaken the faithful's appreciation of liturgy's innate sacramentality.⁹

By beginning with a consideration of the paschal mystery, Chauvet breaks with the traditional approach formulated by Scholastic theology. The point of departure for the Scholastics was the mystery of the Incarnation. By placing the treatise on the sacraments after the treatise on christology, this approach characterized the sacraments as "the prolongation down to us of the 'holy humanity' of Christ."¹⁰ Chauvet proceeds differently. He builds his sacramental theology on the paschal (Easter) mystery rather than the hypostatic union in order that he might challenge our presuppositions about God and about the sacraments. He poses the radical question: "What sort of God are we then speaking about if we are able to maintain, in faith, that God offers God's very self to be encountered through the mediation of the most material, the most corporeal, the most institutional of the Church's actions, the rites?"¹¹ In Chauvet's schema,

⁸ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 484–85.

¹⁰ Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 155.

¹¹ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 498.

the sacraments appear not as the somehow static prolongations of the incarnation as such but as the major expression, in our own history, of the embodiment (historical/eschatological) of the risen One in the world through the Spirit, embodiment whose "fundamental sacrament" is the church visibly born at Pentecost. The sacraments are thus situated in the dynamism of a secular history reread as a holy history. The theological affirmation of sacramental grace is understood in the wake of the church's faith in the power of the risen One continually raising for himself, through the Spirit, a body of new humanity.¹²

This "new humanity" is the corporeal manifestation of God's presence in the world. For this reason, we call the church a *sacramentum mundi*.

These two key aspects of Chauvet's methodology—developing a theological anthropology of symbol and starting with the paschal mystery rather than the Incarnation—provide pathways for discovering new insights into the celebration of the sacraments in a world torn by violence and disruption. For by focusing on symbol as the negotiator of identity and relationships and by highlighting the paschal mystery as the starting point for interpreting liturgical celebrations, Chauvet lays a foundation for retrieving a key understanding of Christian sacraments as symbolizing activity that shapes a people who can be instruments of reconciliation and signs of eschatological hope.

RECONCILING RELATIONSHIPS

On the anthropological level, symbolizing activity is about weaving and reweaving human relationships and thereby coming to know one's identity. On the theological level, sacramental activity is also about weaving and reweaving relationships in order to discover one's identity. But in the case of the sacraments, those relationships have an important theological dimension. The relationships negotiated include individuals with themselves, individuals with the community (church), and the church, thus constituted, with God and all creation.

Genesis tells us that before the Fall, our first parents were in right relationship with God, self, each other, and all creation. The New Testament tells us that the rupture that resulted from the Fall has finally been repaired or reconciled by the death and resurrection of Christ. Our participation in all the sacraments is fundamentally directed toward a lifetime response to God's invitation to be reconciled with

God—and hence with each other and creation. This response is ritually enacted through the sacraments and involves an ever-deepening participation in the paschal mystery of Jesus Christ.

Thus the reconciliation of humankind with God and all creation is primarily a response that takes the forms of the slow and halting journey toward the wholeness lost with the Fall and ransomed by the death and resurrection of Christ. Biblical wisdom refers to this wholeness as "justice," a justice that brings human beings into right relationship with God, self, others, and creation. John R. Donahue provides a succinct definition of biblical justice when he explains:

In general terms the biblical idea of justice can be described as *fidelity to the demands of a relationship*. In contrast with modern individualism the Israelite is in a world where "to live" is to be united to others in a social context either by bonds of family or covenant relationships. This web of relationships—king with people, judge with complainants, family with tribe and kinfolk, the community with the resident alien and [with the] suffering in their midst and all with the covenant God—constitutes the world in which life is played out.¹³

Donahue speaks of a "web of relationships." Using Chauvet's framework, we would say that this web is constituted by the symbolic network that weaves and reweaves the individual and communal life of Israel. Fidelity to relationship is a necessary component of living a life of justice.

Walter J. Burghardt offers a telling description of what that justice looked like in daily life in Israel:

They were just when they were in right relation in all aspects of their life: properly postured toward God, toward other men and women, and toward the earth, God's material creation. Love God above all else; love every man, woman, and child like another self, as an image of God; touch God's nonhuman creation, all that is not God or the human person, with reverence, not as despot but as steward.¹⁴

¹³ John R. Donahue, "Biblical Perspectives on Justice," *The Faith That Does Justice: Examining the Christian Sources for Social Change*, ed. John C. Haughey (New York: Paulist Press, 1977), 69.

¹⁴ Walter J. Burghardt, "Worship and Justice Reunited," *Liturgy and Justice: to Worship God in Spirit and Truth*, ed. Anne Koester (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2002), 36.

¹² Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 160.

Rejoice, heavenly powers! Sing, choirs of angels!
Exult, all creation around God's throne!
Jesus Christ, our King, is risen!
Sound the trumpet of salvation!

Unbounded joy is the tenor of these lines, a joy that bursts into song from the firm conviction that Jesus Christ has risen from the dead. Furthermore, this cry of joy calls upon heaven and earth to join in celebrating this event. The text describes a world in which heaven and earth and all creation are united (in right relationship) because Christ is risen. This reference to creation is rooted in a biblical understanding of the cosmos as infused with the loving and active power of the Spirit's creative presence (see Gen 1:1).¹⁸ The call for a royal trumpet fanfare complements the reference of Christ as king and underscores the significance of this earth-and-heaven-shaking event. The royal metaphor expresses the belief, common in the medieval world in which this text originates, that all is well in the realms of heaven and earth when the king (in this case, Christ) is victorious.

Rejoice, O earth, in shining splendor,
radiant in the brightness of your King!
Christ has conquered! Glory fills you!
Darkness vanishes for ever!

The text is filled with images of light. Together, the four lines proclaim that the darkness of the earth is vanished in the shining splendor of Christ's victory. That is, creation reflects in its own radiant beauty the moral beauty of Christ's victory over sin and death. Indeed, in the glow of countless candles around the imposing paschal candle, light indeed appears to have conquered darkness. The text announces something more, however, when it claims that darkness vanishes *for ever*. It is the first intimations of an eschatological thrust to the text. Our sights are set on a future that is being celebrated as already accomplished in the present. A little later on, the text continues:

Most blessed of all nights, chosen by God
to see Christ rising from the dead!

¹⁸ See also John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), xviii.

Of this night scripture says:

"The night will be as clear as day:
it will become my light, my joy."

In this section, light and darkness are more broadly juxtaposed. The darkness of the night is declared blessed because it is out of that darkness that light and life erupt by the power of Christ's rising from the dead. The paradox of the resurrection, the paradox of life emerging out of death, is expressed through the paradox of night appearing "as clear as day." The text equates darkness with death and sin, and light with salvation and life. The vision of light provides a sense of well-being and happiness. What follows describes that sense of well-being even more specifically when it says:

The power of this holy night
dispels all evil, washes guilt away,
restores lost innocence, brings mourners joy;
it casts out hatred, brings us peace, and humbles
earthly pride.

Night truly blessed when heaven is wedded to earth
and man is reconciled with God!

The message is expressed in the present tense. The claims are bold. This night dispels all evil, washes guilt away, casts out hatred, brings joy and peace. Finally, such a state of affairs among human beings signals an even deeper reality: all humankind is reconciled with God. Notice that the text does not say that the *light* achieves this state of perfection or reconciliation (biblical justice), but that the *night* achieves these wondrous things. The night of sin and evil, the night of Christ's suffering and death, result in a world where joy and peace prevail. This paradox is captured by the exclamation:

O happy fault, O necessary sin of Adam,
which gained for us so great a Redeemer!

An eschatological tension exists within the language of the *Exsultet* because the "future" (a reconciled world) is described as present in the "now" (a time still beleaguered by evil, disruption, and violence). Because of the construction of the text and its interplay with the symbols of darkness and light, the healing and reconciliation proclaimed so boldly in the song is envisioned as already achieved.

It is this ability of sacramental language to name the sources of both the darkness and the light that shapes the Christian community and enables them to discover the reason for their hope. This language is expressed not only as text, but also as movement and gesture, music and silence, darkness and light. In this way, the interplay of symbols in the text with the symbols of candle, fire, song, procession, and posture serves both to express and shape the Easter faith of the community. Repeated year after year on this night, this sacramental action mediates the transformation of those who participate. Such sacramental events empower Christians to be for the world a "sacrament" that speaks a vision of hope and contributes to building a world where reconciliation is possible through the power of Christ's resurrection.

The *Exsultet* closes with the following petition:

May the Morning Star which never sets find this flame still burning:

Christ, that Morning Star, who came back from the dead,
and shed his peaceful light on all mankind,
your Son who lives and reigns for ever and ever.
Amen.

The eschatological theme that runs throughout the *Exsultet* is reiterated in these final lines. Christ's resurrection from the dead is humankind's source of hope and peace. That hope and peace are symbolized by the tangible, bodily experience of light conquering the darkness of night. Basking in that light, the assembly prepares for what will follow: the proclamation of the Scripture readings, the Initiation Rites with water, oil, and candle, and the eucharistic sharing of the bread and wine.

THE ESCHATOLOGICAL LANGUAGE OF HEALING AND RECONCILIATION

If symbolizing activity is about weaving and reweaving relationships, the *Exsultet* makes clear that a fundamental aspect of all the sacraments is the reconciliation of relationships—individuals with themselves, individuals with the community, and the community with God and all creation. Several verbs in the text signal this reconciliatory role: ransomed, freed, restored, wedded, reconciled. This pattern is constitutive of all sacraments since they are the means by which the church celebrates the gift of redemption won for us by the death and

resurrection of Christ. It is by negotiating right relationships that sacraments, as language, speak Christ's word of healing and reconciliation. In other words, the sacramental rites are the means by which a healed and/or reconciled world is spoken. Furthermore, in speaking this word of healing and reconciliation, the thrust of this language is clearly eschatological. This is particularly the case with the Eucharist. As Bruce Morrill explains:

The Church realizes itself as the body of Christ through the symbolic words, objects, actions and, moreover, through the overall shape of the structure of the eucharistic liturgy. This shape, however, is based on the eschatological principle that the liturgy is the one way that the Church, situated as it is in the old world, can experientially know, can envision, the new world to which God has ordered all things in Christ.¹⁹

The *Exsultet* is an example, par excellence, of the way in which the symbolizing activity of the sacraments enables the church to face the darkness of the present (old) world and yet envision a future (new) world where evil, guilt, and hatred are cast out and joy and peace prevail on earth. Sacraments proclaim that the salvation won for us in Christ is bestowed in superabundance on those who accept Christ's gift. This salvation, this grace, heals and reconciles us to God, self, each other, and all creation. The eschatological character of the sacraments enables Christians to live in the present world without despair or cynicism, facing the darkness of evil with the firm hope that the salvation not yet experienced in its fullness will be enjoyed at the parousia. The language of the liturgy reflects the tension of this already/not yet situation. In other words, while the liturgy speaks a vision of a world in right relationship, it also acknowledges that the world has not yet achieved that state for which it ardently longs.

NEGOTIATING RELATIONSHIP, TRANSFORMING A PEOPLE, AND OVERCOMING BOUNDARIES

Chauvet reminds us that since sacramental rites are a form of symbolizing activity, the sacramental symbols we celebrate, like all human symbols, mediate identity and relationships. This mediation of identity

¹⁹ Bruce Morrill, *Anamnesis as Dangerous Memory: Political and Liturgical Theology in Dialogue* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2000), 112.

involves not only individual identity, but also the identity of the community, in this case, the church. Certainly we live in a world of violence, fear, disruption, and despair. Regularly celebrating the sacraments does not provide Christians with rose-tinted glasses that block out the stark reality of these times. Rather—as the example of the *Exsultet* powerfully demonstrates—regularly celebrating the sacraments over time transforms us into a people who put on Christ and commit ourselves to participating daily in the paschal mystery. Celebrating sacramental symbols is the way in which that transformation occurs because symbols are the means by which we negotiate our identity as Christians and our relationship to the ecclesial community we call church. The symbolizing activity forges and strengthens that identity and those relationships over time. By our daily, weekly, yearly commerce with God and with each other by means of such symbols as bread, wine, water, oil, and fire, we are able to name the violence and hate that pervades our world, not only as a reality “out there,” but also as a reality present in every human heart. The transformation, healing, and reconciliation of the world begin with the transformation, healing, and reconciliation of a people into the Body of Christ. For as Chauvet points out, the symbolic order itself designates the system of connections that form a coherent whole, allowing us to situate ourselves in our world in a significant way.²⁰

Sacramental symbols, therefore, signal Christian identity and constitute the church. In doing so, however, they also set up boundaries. Some belong and others do not. There is a paradox here, one that is inherent in a sacramental system that contains both human and divine elements. For while the sacraments point to the particularity of God’s grace within an institution we call church, nevertheless the universality of God’s reign crosses out those boundaries and reminds us that the Spirit is in the church so that the church may be sacrament for the entire world.²¹ Such a realization has serious implications for the way Christians relate, not only to each other, but also to the world for which we are sign of God’s healing and reconciliation.

This is what biblical justice requires of the Christian community and what we commit ourselves to when we celebrate the sacramental rites. As people living out the paschal mystery in their very flesh, Christians are called to cooperate with the Spirit in the healing of relationships,

not only within the church, but with all humankind and all creation. It involves not only the poor and the disenfranchised, but also the stranger, the alienated, members of other faiths or religions, those who do not believe in God, and every element of the created world. When finally the reign of God is fully revealed, all our relationships will be righted. The God whom we encounter through the most material, most corporeal action of Christian sacraments is the God we also encounter in the building up and healing of our broken world. In celebrating the sacraments we commit ourselves to becoming that sacramental sign, that Body that God inhabits in order to reconcile a world that longs for the peace and joy promised as its inheritance.

²⁰ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 84–85.

²¹ See Chauvet, *The Sacraments*, 169.