

2006

Commentary: Embodiment, Integration, and Authenticity: Keys to Reshaping the Catholic Sacramental Imagination

Judith M. Kubicki

Follow this and additional works at: https://fordham.bepress.com/theology_facultypubs

Part of the [Liturgy and Worship Commons](#), and the [Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Kubicki, Judith M., "Commentary: Embodiment, Integration, and Authenticity: Keys to Reshaping the Catholic Sacramental Imagination" (2006). *Theology Faculty Publications*. 2.
https://fordham.bepress.com/theology_facultypubs/2

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Theology at DigitalResearch@Fordham. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theology Faculty Publications by an authorized administrator of DigitalResearch@Fordham. For more information, please contact considine@fordham.edu.

Commentary: Embodiment, Integration, and Authenticity: Keys to Reshaping the Catholic Sacramental Imagination

Judith Marie Kubicki, C.S.S.F.

Both Therese Schroeder-Sheker and Bruce Morrill, S.J. provide the reader with an abundance of vivid images and engaging ideas regarding sacramentality and healing. Such richness allows for a limited response to the key foundational principles offered by means of story, analysis, and reflection throughout the three chapters. They include the importance of working toward the integration of body, mind, and spirit, the inestimable value of authentic performance, and the challenge these insights pose for the revitalization of the celebration of sacraments of healing.

Therese Schroeder-Sheker's "The Vox Feminae: Choosing and Being as Christian Form and Praxis" offers stories of ritual performance that illuminate the sacramentality of daily life. Two sections are particularly powerful in their impact: her reflections on the vocation of the music-thanatologist and the story of Meredith's keening in response to the death of her newborn son, Tyler. Both highlight embodiment and integration as part of the healing process and emerge from a sacramental vision of life.

Schroeder-Sheker's description of the ministry of the music-thanatologist invites comparisons with that of the icon painter. In both cases the musical performance and the icon become windows that provide the possibility for glimpsing the divine. The artist as either musician or painter observes a spiritual regimen such as prayer and fasting that enables metanoia or change of heart. Inner conversion is requisite for the performance of the music and the painting of the icon. In the case at hand, the performance of the music emerges from a life journey of conversion that is holistic—its goal is the full integration of body, mind, and spirit. Such integration allows God's healing to shine through the music-thanatologist who embodies that wholeness to which God is calling the dying person.

Applying J.L. Austin's performative language theory to musical performance can assist in identifying what the performance aspects of music-thanatology accomplish. To use Austin's terminology, the illocutionary force of singing

allows the musician to *do something* in the act of singing. Those same principles can be applied *mutatis mutandis* to music-thanatology. In this instance, the musical performance creates a state of affairs and situates participants in a sonic environment that invites contemplative openness. In other words, the musical performance provides sonic structures within which healing and reconciliation can occur by promoting openness, heightening awareness, and enabling receptivity—all qualities that orient a person to perceiving the sacramentality of life and experiencing God's healing and integrative action.¹

This "accomplishing of an action" was poignantly illustrated in the story of Meredith and Tyler. In the absolute depths of her grief at the loss of her newborn son, Meredith loses herself in the sacred act of "keening." By giving herself over totally to the unimaginable grief that fills her entire being, her inner groaning finds a voice in a wailing of almost superhuman proportions. In that very act of keening, voice becomes the intersection of body and spirit. This embodiment of grief is response, expression, and means of healing her deep sorrow. Indeed, keening is a step toward healing not only for Meredith, but for the hospital staff and the other young pregnant women who stand in silent vigil to her response to this tragedy.

Schroeder-Sheker's stories challenge us in a dramatic way to reflect on our own ways-of-being with those who suffer gravely or mortally. How can our sacramental rites of healing promote that authentic integration of body and spirit that opens up a person to God's healing? Schroeder-Sheker's story graphically illustrates that it cannot be accomplished by simply rewriting prayers in the ritual books, but by exploring the potential for music, silence, and personal presence to enhance an experience of God's healing touch—a touch that is more often soul wrenching and life changing than many of us would be willing to admit.

In "Practicing the Pastoral Care of the Sick: The Sacramental Body in Liturgical Motion," Bruce Morrill not only provides a model for doing liturgical theology that addresses the issues of academics. He also raises issues that have practical and pastoral implications for liturgical performance. His performative approach to learning and his adaptation of the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults (RCIA) model for preparing participants for the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick suggests several creative possibilities for revitalizing the sacramental rites of healing. Furthermore, Morrill's success with the RCIA encourages more creative and extensive implementation of that model in yet other celebrations of sacramental rites.

Perhaps it is the image of the dancer in Morrill's narrative that best illustrates the centrality of embodiment, not so much as a focus on the physical, but as an instance of the integration of body, mind, and spirit. By means of motion and gesture, the dancers delineate space, energize ritual action, and gather the assembly into a unified whole. One of Morrill's acknowledged concerns was that all of the elements of the liturgy celebrated during the conference be experienced as integral to the lives of the various communities involved. By attending to that concern, the liturgy as he describes it, possesses an authenticity that engages the participants, not on the level of

demonstration or show, but as authentic worship that involves body, mind, and spirit. It is the same kind of authenticity demanded of the music thanatologist and expressed by Meredith's keening. In the case of the celebration of the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick for the conference, the dancers are both integrated into the rite, the space, and the community even as they serve to integrate all of these aspects. The result is an authentic expression of ministry through this art form.

In chapter 8, entitled "Christ the Healer: An Investigation of Contemporary Liturgical, Pastoral, and Biblical Approaches," Bruce Morrill builds a theological case for an issue that he raised in chapter 7. Earlier, he reported his discovery that despite Vatican II, the great majority of Catholics, both clergy and lay, continue to imagine the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, not as it has been promulgated by the reform, but as the former sacrament of the dying, that is, Extreme Unction. In other words, he locates a key failure of the reform of the Pastoral Care of the Sick, not in poorly constructed or enacted rituals, but in the Catholic imagination formed by an official emphasis on the first of three possible typologies of Christ, Christ the Priest. The other two are Christ the Sacrament and Jesus the Prophet and Healer. Morrill points out that the Church locates its doctrinal support of the sacrament of the sick in the Letter of James rather than in the Gospel stories of Christ as healer. This strategy effectively directs the imagination to view the ministry of healing as the sole responsibility of the priest. Such a focus effectively dispenses with a need for the type of community participation envisioned in the Pastoral Care of the Sick. This is a particularly telling observation. The current preoccupation of Vatican documents with protecting and clearly delineating the role of the priest, particularly in regard to the sacramental rites, does not bode well for rectifying this situation.

Morrill convincingly argues that the typologies of Christ the Sacrament and Jesus the Prophet and Healer have not yet begun to shape the imagination of the average Catholic. Both have influenced the construction of the reformed rites and the perspectives of academic theologians, but they are yet largely untapped resources in the larger Church. Morrill's insightful interpretation of the three typologies is useful for understanding, not only the failure of the Catholic imagination to grasp the paradigm shift intended by the reform in regard to the Sacrament of the Anointing of the Sick, but also in regard to the Sacrament of Reconciliation. Nevertheless, Morrill is acutely aware that this is not the whole story.

Morrill raises a further issue that needs serious consideration if we are to construct rituals that truly celebrate God's healing of human being. Ultimately whether the sick avail themselves of the sacrament depends on a faith in and a desire for the healing power of Jesus Christ. No amount of ritual reform or liturgical planning will necessarily inspire anyone to present themselves for this sacramental ministry. Morrill acknowledges this when he insists that sacramental liturgy needs to be understood and practiced as God's activity among those hungering for it. It is the hungering of the person for this healing, a realization that "life will not or cannot go on as it has [and]

that one needs the salvific support of Christ to renegotiate one's place in the world and in the presence of God." Here Morrill's reference to Paul Minear's work is especially helpful. In both chapter 7 and 8, Morrill provides guidance for how both the theologian and the pastoral minister might assist the sick in coming to this recognition of hunger for God's presence or need for Christ's salvific grace. Again, the RCIA model is an obvious untapped resource for this ministry.

Morrill's important distinction between healing an illness and curing a disease raises a further challenge to the formation (or re-formation) of the Catholic imagination. Deliverance from illness requires a more integrative approach that includes the renegotiation of relations with the community, God, and self. That is why the rites presume a communal setting. Nevertheless, Morrill's identification of the valorization of science and medical progress as major influences on that formation needs to be acknowledged and dealt with more creatively in the Pastoral Care of the Sick. This is an area that needs further exploration and development. Since our contemporary context does not place value on weakness, it is difficult for us to imagine a position of vulnerability as potentially advantageous on any level. Yet, the mystery of the Cross reveals that weakness is a channel of God's offer of grace to humankind. Therefore, despite the successes that the medical profession may achieve in curing disease, there remains a critical need for the Church to concern itself with the healing of illness—that coming to wholeness that is at the heart of the Christian journey. Morrill's analysis challenges the Church to assume a more prophetic voice in pointing out the inadequacy of an approach to suffering that does not go beyond the competencies of science.

Finally, Morrill's reading of the "General Introduction to Pastoral Care of the Sick" highlights important insights that have yet to catch the imagination of most clergy and laity when it comes to viewing illness from a perspective of faith. While one of the purposes of anointing the sick is to give comfort and strength to the sick, there is another, often forgotten dimension. It is the fact that the sick themselves, in their very infirmity, function as sacraments, that is, as living signs of the action of God in their lives. The community's presence, to the sick, thereby becomes an opportunity for the community to be transformed by the witness of those who suffer in their midst. The story of the silent community of witnesses to Meredith's keening in chapter 6 expressed that truth profoundly. Where is this notion active and alive in the Catholic imagination?

Surely a tension will always exist between creativity and ritual practice within cultural and social structures that are continually evolving and changing. Both Schroeder-Sheker and Morrill offer important insights for negotiating that tension. As with any human activity involving symbol, sacramental celebrations of anointing are critical for enabling the community and the sick members within them to weave and reweave identity and relationships threatened by serious illness. The three chapters in this section raise up the importance of reimagining authentic theological meanings through an integration that is both expressed and experienced as embodied.