

What is conscious participation?: Lonergan's contribution to a Liturgical Hermeneutics

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What does the liturgy mean? The usual way of answering that question is by appeal to descriptive formulations that relate the liturgy to the work of redemption, as for example one finds in *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, “the liturgy, ‘through which the work of our redemption is accomplished,’ most of all in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, is the outstanding means whereby the faithful may express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church.”¹ Certainly, this is a good answer to the question, but it raises many further questions that require answers. So, to answer the question, ‘what does the liturgy mean?’ demands that we engage a series of other relevant questions related to meaning as a human phenomenon generally, including the various ways in which human beings mean and receive meaning, and other questions related to the particular ways in which the liturgy as a particular kind of meaning means. This is the work of a liturgical hermeneutics that employs methods adequate for interpreting the particular kind of mediation of meaning the liturgy is. This paper explores Bernard Lonergan’s contribution to a liturgical hermeneutics, by attending to the conscious subject in order to develop an adequate understanding of the role of language and symbolic mediation in what *Sacrosanctum Concilium* calls “fully conscious and active participation.”² While a focus on the active participation of the faithful in liturgy has led to

¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2.

² *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 14. I am using the Vatican translation of the Latin: “*Valde cupit Mater Ecclesia ut fideles universi ad plenam illam, consciam atque actuosam liturgicarum*

varying degrees of involvement in liturgical celebrations since Vatican II, relatively little attention has been given to the significance of the “conscious” character of that participation. Clearly, being conscious at least means being awake, but we can imagine the council fathers had more than that in mind. I propose that attention to “conscious participation” is foundational for a future sacramental theology that transposes scholastic notions of instrumentality and causality into categories of interiority. In order to begin thinking about the conscious participation, I move first to Lonergan’s understanding of subjectivity based on his intentionality analysis. Second, I turn to the categories of meaning developed in *Method in Theology* to begin thinking about the distinctive character of liturgical mediations of meaning. Third, I very briefly turn from methodological considerations to identify a possibly significant contribution of Lonergan’s psychological analogy for the Trinity to a theology of the liturgy.³ The work of bringing Lonergan into conversation with liturgical and sacramental theology has been going on a long time. It has recently been revived in the pages of *Worship* in articles by Ian Bell and Timothy

celebrationum participationem ducantur.” It would seem that Flannery’s translation “full, conscious and active” is more accurate, but “fully conscious” captures the impact of the conscious dimension of liturgical participation.

³ What I am saying here is not particularly novel except perhaps in that it appeals to Lonergan. Indeed many other liturgical theologians have been looking to contributions from hermeneutic philosophy for many years. But developing a liturgical hermeneutic requires that we come to some verifiable account of the subjects of worship. I believe such an account is found in the works of Bernard Lonergan.

Brunk. I hope it is a conversation that continues as I hope the present contribution moves it forward.

1. Lonergan's postmodern subject

The subjects that participate in worship at the present time, especially in our own country exist in a context that is chaotic. Fred Lawrence describes our particular disorder this way: “the subject as subject is ever conscious of an ongoing non-coincidence with itself as it negotiates the complex networks of social, cultural, and political influences insinuated most pervasively into our lives by language. The subject’s performance is massively conditioned by education, socialization, and acculturation. These networks constrain us almost always to handle the non-coincidence of ourselves with ourselves by faking roles that do not really mean what we feel and think internally. It is perhaps only rarely that such subjects reach what Lonergan calls ‘the critical point when subjects realize that their existence is at issue, at stake’.”⁴ Lonergan’s 1968 lecture “The Subject” exposes the roots of Lawrence’s diagnosis.

1.1. Subjectivity

There Lonergan uncovers three potential distortions of human subjectivity that lead to the emergence of the existential and alienated subjects of post-modern concern. The first distortion is the *neglected subject* of the scholastic reaction to modernity, which emphasizes objective truth in a way that disregards or undermines the very conditions of its emergence and existence.⁵

Lonergan identified the problem in 1968 saying “if at the present time among Catholics there is discerned a widespread alienation from the dogmas of faith, this is not unconnected with a

⁴ Frederick G. Lawrence, “Grace and Friendship: Postmodern Political Theology and God as Conversational,” *Gregorianum* 85, 4 (2004), 797.

⁵ Lonergan, “The Subject,” 71.

previous one-sidedness that so insisted on the objectivity of truth as to leave subjects and their needs out of the account.”⁶ In relation to liturgy and sacraments this methodological orientation can be found in certain formulations of sacramental causality, e.g., *ex opere operato*. Subjects are neglected because objectivity is simply a matter of adhering to what is “out there” be it a sacramental symbol or a rock.⁷ If knowing deals with what is obviously perceivable, then any need for interpretation of the data is *merely* subjective. Accordingly, neglect of the subject influences the way the worshipping assembly is imagined and understood, in effect excluding significant reflection on conscious participation.

The second distortion Lonergan names the ‘truncated subject’ based on an oversight of insight which leads to conceptualism.⁸ For the truncated subject certitude becomes a matter of what is *conceptually* self-evident. Concepts impress themselves on intellect, thus reducing the intellect’s role to that of a conceptual mirror. The task of the subject here is to “look” at the concepts and then compare them with the things that are out there.⁹ Conceptualism finds its way

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Romano Guardini’s *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, the inspiration for Joseph Ratzinger’s book of the same title describes the liturgy in these kinds of terms as a “universal/eternal law,” and an “objective manifestation.” Guardini is attentive to the challenge of subjectivity in liturgical life, but in a rather truncated way. See also Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (The Catholic University of America, 1994) and Laurence Paul Hemming, *Worship as a Revelation: The Past, Present and Future of Catholic Liturgy* (New York: Burns and Oates, 2008).

⁸ Ibid., 73.

⁹ Ibid., 74. See also *Insight*, 430.

into the liturgy when conceptual understandings of God, conceptual idols,¹⁰ dominate the consciousness of worshipers.

Third, if the neglected or truncated subjects focus on objects, whether sensory or conceptual, then the distortion Lonergan calls the “immanentist subject” emerges out of a desire to critically ground the objectivity of knowing in response to dogmatism and conceptualism. Ultimately, however, the turn to the immanent subject does not reject the notion that knowing is like looking.¹¹ Here Lonergan singles out the Kantian argument. By funneling objectivity through sensitive intuition of phenomena alone, Kant reduces the knowable world to the phenomenal world, so that our judgments and reasoning only regard phenomena, never the things themselves, thus opening the door to Hegel’s absolute idealism. For example, Schillebeeckx attempt to explain Eucharistic change by proposing both transignification and transubstantiation reflects a Kantian separation of phenomenal and noumenal.¹²

Kierkegaard reacts to Hegelianism by attending to the ‘existential subject’ in its concrete historicity. For, the subject is not simply a knower, or a disembodied objective mind, but

¹⁰ See Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

¹¹ It acknowledges that the contents of sense perception as subsumed under categories attain objective knowledge of appearances (phenomena) alone while the underlying thing-in-itself (noumenon) is only apprehended subjectively

¹² See Edward Schillebeeckx, O.P., *The Eucharist*, trans. N.D. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1968). See also Giovanni Sala, “Transubstantiation oder Transignifikation: Gedenken zu einem dilemma,” *Zeitschrift für Katholische Theologie* 92 (1970): 1-34.

fundamentally a human, one who must make decisions to act in history. Human decisions and actions, more than simply changing the world, transform the subject. Our decisions and deeds make us who we are.¹³ A decadent metaphysical account of the soul hypostasizes intellect and will and fails to advert to the particular substance that knows and chooses, let alone the dynamic structure of its conscious operations.¹⁴ According to Lonergan's account of the move from metaphysical substance to conscious subject, we become subjects gradually, but the neo-scholastic metaphysics of substance cannot take this dynamism in the human subject into account.

The shift to the existential subject in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries is not without its difficulties particularly alienation, which became a key philosophical category beginning with Rousseau and Marx. Alienation describes the existential subject's experience of being able to become itself freely and with dignity in a world that has settled into an absurd routine that degrades the human being into nothing more than a mindless producer and consumer. Lonergan identifies this alienation in the subject whose desire for the good is derailed into doubting the goodness of the universe, and consequently feeling alien in such an indifferent even hostile universe.¹⁵ To overcome the alienation of the contemporary subject Lonergan urges that we pay close attention to the questions of cognitional theory, epistemology, and

¹³ Lonergan, "The Subject," 79.

¹⁴ Ibid., 79-80.

¹⁵ There is an echo here of the account of 'hope against hope,' or 'asking God for God' that is so central to the post-holocaust theology of Johann Baptist Metz. See Johann Baptist Metz, *A Passion for God: The Mystical-Political Dimension of Christianity*, trans., ed. J. Matthew Ashley (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 1997).

metaphysics, but in a way that does not ignore the facts of human suffering and the absurdity that distorts the human community. This was Lonergan's goal in *Insight* which he expanded in *Method in Theology* to include an analysis of the role of feelings and values in intentionality analysis.

1.2. The Subject as Subject: what is consciousness?

Consciousness for Lonergan is not an elevated state to be achieved, or an abstraction of mind, rather it is simply being aware. Lonergan notes that to be conscious we must at least be present to ourselves so that we are present to the world, e.g., feeling hot or cold, hearing noises, seeing light, dark, and color. Lonergan's notion of conscious self-presence is easily misinterpreted. He cautions that consciousness is not simply an inward look: "there is the word, introspection, which is misleading inasmuch as it suggests an inward inspection. Inward inspection is just a myth. Its origin lies in the mistaken analogy that all cognitional events are to be conceived on the analogy of ocular vision."¹⁶ As Lonergan clarifies, "I have been attempting to describe the subject's presence to himself. But the reader, if he tries to find himself as subject, to reach back and, as it were, uncover his subjectivity cannot succeed. Any such effort is introspecting, attending to the subject, and what is found is not the subject as subject, but only the subject as object; it is the subject as subject that does the finding."¹⁷ Conscious self-presence is not a deliberate activity in addition to sensing, understanding, formulating, reflecting, judging, and deliberating¹⁸ but the awareness that accompanies those acts which not only intend certain

¹⁶ Lonergan, *Method in Theology*, (1972), 8.

¹⁷ Lonergan, "Cognitional Structure," 210.

¹⁸ See *Insight*, 345. Commonly "conscious" holds a connotation of will. See Mark Morelli,

"Consciousness is Not an Operation." See note 277 above.

objects but also reveal an intending subject.¹⁹ We discover ourselves as subjects in the operations we perform.

The subject *as* subject, as present to itself and its world, i.e., as conscious, is often forgotten in modern philosophy with its desire to discover the universal foundations of objectivity understood as necessity. Postmodern thinkers frequently argue that the modern subject appears to be a disembodied intellect unencumbered by its historicity, unaware that experience is mediated through a body and by a culture. Lonergan is well aware of this problem in his exploration of human consciousness, as we noted above with regard to his analysis of modern distortions of the subject. He recognizes that human experience is mediated and complex, that human consciousness is polymorphic, and nothing like a mirror.

1.3. *The Polymorphism of Human Consciousness.*

In *Insight* Lonergan remarks, “the polymorphism of human consciousness is the one and only key to philosophy” (452). The ramifications of this claim have been explored in a thorough study of Lonergan’s notion of polymorphism by Gerard Walmsley.²⁰ Lonergan’s analysis of the polymorphism of human consciousness meets the postmodern concerns about the embodied character of human knowing and acting, and the cultural and linguistic mediation of experience. Our experience itself is patterned as a result of the polymorphism of consciousness as now one, now another aspect of experience dominates our consciousness. In *Insight* Lonergan identifies and elaborates the biological, aesthetic, intellectual, and dramatic patterns of experience; in *Method in Theology* he adds to the list ‘practical’ and ‘worshipful’ patterns. Although Lonergan

¹⁹ Lonergan, *Method*, 15.

²⁰ See Gerard Walmsley, S.J., *Lonergan on Philosophic Pluralism: The Polymorphism of Consciousness as the Key to Philosophy* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008).

does not expand on his meaning at that point Ian Bell has helpfully elaborated what the worshipful pattern of experience might include.²¹

Bell's elaboration of the worshipful pattern includes four elements: "First, it is a religious experience in which human persons and communities become conscious of being in love with God in an unrestricted fashion. Secondly, it is an expression of religious meaning insofar as Christian persons articulate what that state means and its implications for human living. Thirdly, it is an experience of prayer, and in prayer Christ is mediated on both an objective and subjective level. Fourthly, in the Christian context the worshipful pattern of experience may be either communal or personal, but personal worship always occurs within the context of the communal expression of religious meaning."²² From these four elements Bell concludes that the data that emerge in a worshipful pattern will consist of "1) an awareness of the religious meanings that give concrete expression to the religious conversion of individuals, 2) Christ as mediated objectively, and 3) the subjective mediation of Christ in the transformation of Christian persons."²³ Bell wants to argue that "By attending and responding to the worshipful pattern of experience human subjects experience the 'growth in holiness' which Lonergan associates with the worshipful pattern of experience."²⁴ Indeed, worship is the preeminent place where the subject is caught up into the divine conversation that is the Trinity through its participation in the missions of the Word and the Spirit. Adverting to that experience begins by asking the question

²¹ Ian Bell, "An Elaboration of the Worshipful Pattern of Experience in the Works of Bernard Lonergan," *Worship*, 81/6 (November 2007): 521-539.

²² Bell, 535-6.

²³ Bell, 538.

²⁴ Bell, 536.

for self-appropriation, “What am I doing when I am worshipping?” One aspect of an answer to that question would be “exchanging meaning” or “communicating.”

2. *Meaning*

In *Method in Theology* Lonergan distinguishes between elements, functions, carriers and realms of meaning. Without rehearsing each of these categories of meaning here I want to draw your attention to constitutive meaning. The constitutive function of meaning is what makes a thing to be what it is. Constitutive meanings shape horizons through culture, religion, philosophy, literature, and politics. The meanings and values mediated thusly not only shape identity but also constitute subjects and communities. They are “intrinsic” to what a person or group is and is to be. These meanings change, and insofar as they change the individual or the group is different from what they had been hitherto. Those changes can be conversions that yield not simply a new horizon, but a transformed subject in a new horizon. As a correlate of the constitutive function of meaning, Lonergan identifies a world constituted by meaning.

The transition from human being conceived as substance to human being understood as subject is verified in the transition from the world of immediacy of the infant into the world mediated by meaning of the adult. But as subjects have more and more to do with their own becoming they begin to constitute worlds. Beyond the world mediated by meaning and motivated by value, sublating it, is a world constituted by meaning. That world is one of our own making in which our constitutive communication, or “that communication in which finding our concrete solution to the problem of human living is at stake” assembles the worlds in which we actually live.²⁵ Our human reality is shaped by those meanings and values that constitute our concrete

²⁵ Frederick G. Lawrence, “Lonergan’s Foundations for Constitutive Communication,” *Lonergan Workshop*, 10 (1994): 229-278, here at 231.

solution to the problem of living. This concrete solution is found primarily in performance, in the dramatic artistry of the subject. But the solution undergoes a conversion when “constitutive communication becomes transformed by the real effects of the Trinitarian missions of the Son and the Spirit by the Father; and the network of Trinitarian relationships constitutive of divine Self-meaning becomes the framework or home within which human persons exist in the truth.”²⁶

2.1. Constitutive communication

For Christians, the concrete solution to the problem of human living has been definitively enacted in the dramatic artistry of Jesus of Nazareth. Jesus confronts the human situation of personal and structural sin with a supernatural solution he makes his own throughout his life culminating in the drama of the passion. In his refusal to return evil for evil Jesus reveals the universal law through which our redemption is accomplished – what Lonergan calls the Law of the Cross. That law is mediated by the drama of the liturgy especially understood as, in some sense, sacrificial. In the liturgy Christ’s constitutive communication is mediated to subsequent generations who proclaim the death of the Lord until He comes. It is precisely in proclaiming his death and by symbolizing the eucharistic form of his human life as taken, blessed, broken, and given away that each of us is also able to enter into that drama with him, at least liturgically.²⁷

The greater difficulty lies in appropriating our worshiping selves as our true selves such that our worshiping extends beyond the walls of the church.²⁸ And here we again confront the experience

²⁶ Ibid., 273.

²⁷ Ibid., 274.

²⁸ This is Bell’s primary point in elaborating a worshipful pattern, i.e., that it is not a pattern that exists for one hour on Sunday morning, but a more complex dynamic in the life of human subjects.

of non-coincidence between ourselves as experienced in the liturgy, and ourselves in our concrete performance. To participate consciously in the liturgy is to become increasingly aware of this non-coincidence in a way that fuels the desire for greater authenticity, while at the same time becoming increasingly aware of one's participation in the constitutive communication that is the Trinity. Our desire for authenticity is the fruit of a radical self-honesty that is able to assess our current performance in light of our deepest desires.

But as Fred Lawrence argues, "such radical self-honesty is only really possible in an ambiance of love and forgiveness."²⁹ I would argue an ambiance of love and forgiveness is precisely what the liturgy means as it opens the faithful to the ever renewed transformation of their living in the imitation of the dramatic artistry of the one who lays down his life for his friends. That transformation is a matter of conversion and repentance, or radical self-honesty. That ambiance is mediated, in part, by language, thus the need for a liturgical hermeneutics.

3. *Liturgical Hermeneutics*

Returning briefly to Lonergan's categories of meaning we can say that liturgy is a complex mediation of meaning. It has cognitive, effective, constitutive, and communicative functions, but at its core it is the constitutive communication of the Trinity. Lonergan clarifies, "So the self-communication of the Son and the Spirit proceeds through history by a communication that at once is cognitive, constitutive and redemptive: it is cognitive, for it discloses in whom we are to believe; it is constitutive, for it crystallizes the inner gift of the love of God into overt Christian fellowship; it is redemptive for it liberates human liberty from thralldom to sin and it guides those it liberates to the kingdom of the Father."³⁰ The paradigmatic

²⁹ Lawrence, 255.

³⁰ Lonergan, "Mission and the Spirit," in *A Third Collection*, 32.

form the constitutive communication that brings Christians into overt fellowship is Christ's incarnate meaning dramatized in Eucharistic worship.

The drama of Christian worship is an analogy of the cross. Christ's incarnate meaning reaches its fulfillment in the definitive communication of divine solidarity with humanity in self-sacrificing love, and the faithful enter into that paschal mystery through the Eucharist. As the cross is a symbol of Christ's sacrificial attitude, so the Eucharistic offering of our lives, symbolized by the offering of bread and wine, is a symbol of our own sacrificial attitude. It is at this level of shared intending of meaning that we have to attend carefully to conscious participation and a hermeneutics of the liturgy.

A liturgical hermeneutics involves careful attention to the cognitive, effective, constitutive, and communicative functions of meaning in the liturgy. Distinguishing between these various functions of meaning preserves the core of meaning in the liturgy which is the incarnate meaning of Christ present in the word, sacrament, minister, and community. This presence is mediated through the various functions of meaning requiring careful attention to the levels of consciousness in liturgy. The difficult transition from experiencing the liturgy to deciding to live by the truth of the liturgy is the ongoing work of Christian discipleship, but that work is fundamentally hermeneutical. What's more the liturgy itself is an expression of feelings, artistic understanding, and judgments mediated to us by others through history. That mediation is not pure, but rather encrusted with a whole range of often competing affective states, images, and statements. Vatican II called for a simple liturgy it was to illumine the core of meaning in the liturgy, because historically there have been times when the liturgy seemed to be at odds with

itself.³¹ This may also be the unintended effect of the recent translation of the Roman Missal into English which contains not only grammatical problems, but also, in places, a failure of liturgical hermeneutics. Rendering a text in another language requires not only knowledge of grammar and syntax, but also an understanding of the text in the original language. Concerns over the new translation of the missal reflect competing interpretations of what is going on in the liturgy, which may be why some English speaking Catholics today are struggling to pray the mass authentically.

4. *Conclusion*

Conscious participation can be understood as the incorporation of liturgical subjects into the divine conversation mediated through the manifold symbolic evocations of the liturgy. To talk of conscious participation in that sense is a way of highlighting the fact that liturgy is a mediation of meaning that relates the inner longing of the Spirit with its proper object in the visible mission of the Word. If active participation pertains to outer words, gestures, artifacts, etc., then conscious participation points to the intended realities of such symbolic mediation. But without such attentiveness to the inner gift of the Spirit “the Word enters into his own, but his own receive him not.”³²

Therefore highlighting conscious participation, as a category for liturgical theological reflection, resists a tendency to place too great an emphasis on the performance of the collective ecclesial subject, or to give overweening attention to the rubrics of celebration. Certainly, liturgy is the corporate act of the Christian faithful, but any corporate activity is always already the

³¹ For example the de facto removal of the laity from communion in the medieval period eviscerates the mediation of meaning specific to a communal meal.

³² Lonergan, “Mission and the Spirit,” in *A Third Collection*, 32

result of a common meaning mediated among subjects who receive it according to varying degrees depending on manifold differentiations of consciousness. Likewise, rubrics and texts can help to clarify the outer word of Christian worship, but should not be manipulated in a way that diminishes the inner gift of the Spirit, lest we find ourselves “faking roles” in the liturgy too.