

On the Road to Everywhere:

Louis-Marie Chauvet on the Role of the Church in the Passage to Faith and Witness

In the study of “liturgy” we are often led deeply into the *details* of effective ritual for the celebration of Christian sacraments. We are offered detailed answers to the questions: who? what? where? when? and how? Usually, the goal is to gain *competence* for the “performance” of liturgical leadership, or what some call the “administration” of the rites and ceremonies. A worthy goal. But once in a while we encounter a sacramental theologian who takes a few steps back and asks “why?” – or more precisely, what is the purpose and what is actually achieved in these activities? Many will know Louis-Marie Chauvet as such a sacramental theologian.¹

Chauvet is interested in how sacraments act as the vital “moment” between religious knowledge and the life of witness. He places emphasis on competence for the leadership of worship only as those actions help negotiate the passage from non-faith to faith. The sacraments, he argues, are an action of the church in recognition and reception of a gift, an action of God for us, which raises us up to respond as witnesses. Therefore his questions are slightly different. He seems more interested in what we can say about the relationship with God celebrated and experienced in Christian sacraments, and how these celebrations act as a hermeneutical key for the continuing passage to faith and witness.

Chauvet’s project is wide-ranging and has many purposes, so it is impossible to fairly represent him here.² Yet, with the good news of “Easter” perpetually before us, there is one part of Chauvet’s work that may offer help to the church as it witnesses to Christ in the power of the Spirit.

A Question on the Road to Everywhere

A question – perhaps *the* question – hovering uneasily in the background of all church activity is the question of Easter: “if it is true that Jesus arose and that he is now alive, how is it that we do not see him, that we cannot see/touch/find him?”³ In Luke-Acts we see a persistent pattern of response to this question in the stories of conversion that happen over and over again “on the road” to everywhere. This is the question Chauvet puts in the mouths of the disciples on the road to Emmaus, and the question he finds answered in their story. (Luke 24:13-35, Third Sunday of Easter, Year A; Easter Evening Year B, RCL)

On the road to Emmaus traffic travels two ways. As Chauvet says, “the round trip Jerusalem-Emmaus-Jerusalem ... is exactly what every human being must realize in order to become a disciple of Jesus, the Christ.”⁴ The round trip can be read geographically, theologically, and symbolically as *a performance of conversion which gives competence for witness*.

¹See Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, (Liturgical Press: Collegeville) 1995. and *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Liturgical Press: Collegeville) 2001.

² One might be tempted to give Chauvet’s work a sub-category of its own because it is really *theology through the lens of sacramentality* – a theology of what happens when God reaches out to humankind, when human beings respond to God, and when this “exchange” is celebrated by a faith community.

³Chauvet’s reflection on this question and the source material for what follows can be found in Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* pp. 167-171 and in *The Sacraments* p. 23 ff.

⁴*The Sacraments*, 23

Competence for witness is found in a series of events that believers perpetually undergo, and it leads directly into discipleship and opportunities for conversion in others.

According to the story, *competence is obtained* a) by confessing that we do not know everything about Jesus of Nazareth (24:19), and by entering into dialogue with the risen One, b) by coming to rest “at table” with the risen One where the pattern of “to take/to bless/to break/to share” is performed in prayer and action resulting in recognition of him, and c) confessing the absence of Christ or emptiness (he “vanishes” 24:31) as good news because this emptiness is now full of a presence which is to be announced “that same hour.” This is a scandal; that God entrusts the word to those the risen One meets, calls, and names, and that they arise, go, and tell. They agree to be his body; they must be made competent. Chauvet writes,

It is impossible to recognize the risen Jesus without oneself being impelled to ‘rise’ in newness of life, therefore being entrusted with announcing it. In any case, the classical pattern of the stories of Christ’s manifestation in the New Testament attest to this: after stressing the initiative of the risen One, who “shows himself,” and the recognition by the witnesses of this being “the same” as the crucified Jesus but in another form, it always ends on a command to go on a mission: “Go and tell.”⁵

This is the mission of an Easter people, and the mission is communal. Based on faith in the crucified and risen Jesus, the divine presence-in-absence creates a communion (*koinonia*) whose central purpose is to announce and embody the good news in its worship and life together. This life together as “church” is impossible without obtaining the competence given in this passage from non-faith to faith.

However, there is one major hurdle that makes this continuing conversion a true trial, even for the most mature Christian. Chauvet warns,

To obtain all of this, you must *dis-enthrall* yourselves from your (quite natural) desire for immediate proofs of him. Failing this, you can only reduce him to your own ideology and your own preconceptions: he no longer is for you the living One (see Luke 24:5); by submitting him to your desire and your previous convictions, you manipulate him and thus make him a corpse again...⁶

Chauvet finds in this scriptural discourse the pattern for the discourse of the church. The Easter task of the church is not to lead deeply into the empty tomb, searching the details of his absence, but rather to stand back and “assent to the hearing of a word.” Chauvet insists that you cannot arrive at the recognition of the risen Jesus unless you renounce seeing/touching/finding him by undeniable proofs. Faith begins with this renunciation of “immediacy” and a turn to the mediation of the symbolic order proper to the church.⁷ Chauvet’s contention here is that when

⁵*The Sacraments*, 26

⁶*The Sacraments*, 28

⁷This is not easy. Chauvet writes, “Faith requires an act of dispossession, a reversal of initiative; instead of holding forth with self-assured pronouncements *on* God, one must begin by listening to a word as the word *of* God.” (*Symbol and Sacrament* 168). This dispossession brings into play the possibility that scriptures could disclose a reality about God which was never before thought possible - even according to the doctrines of the day. He observes that those on the road to

asked the question, “if it is true that Jesus is alive, how is it that we cannot see/touch/find him?” Luke would answer, “that very desire is preventing you; live as church and you will recognize him.” Living as church is assent to the symbolic mediation of the culture and language of the church. Chauvet qualifies this by saying,

The church is not Christ, but his symbolic witness, which means that its original and constant *raison d’être* is to direct everything back to him. It is in the church that faith finds its structure because the church is in charge of keeping alive, in the midst of the world and for its good, the memory of what he lived for and why God raised him from the dead: memory through the *Scriptures*, read and interpreted as speaking about him or being his own living word; memory through the *sacraments*, ... recognized as being his own salvific gestures; memory through the *ethical* testimony of mutual sharing, lived as an expression of his own service to humankind.⁸

Competence for *Witness*

Even those who *love* the rites and ceremonies of the church pray for the day when the sacraments will no longer be needed. We live between Ascension and Parousia. Thus, while we pray, we consent to these acts “which are so human, so laden with psychological, social, institution ambiguities”⁹ because they are the concrete mediation of God’s communication – grace. Like the unrecognized Christ on the road to Emmaus, the church comes alongside dejected travelers, we ask them questions, and we learn the ways in which their hope has been shattered. We then witness to Christ from the Scriptures until the travelers say to him “stay with us.” When the risen One is invited in, he becomes the host and we recognize him. Together with the weary ones, we re-know his presence in a new way and all is transformed. His mission becomes our own and we are raised up as his body for the life the world. This is what must become our primary competence.

Our work in pastoral liturgy then, takes on the shape of those who are *primarily* ministers of the gospel and guides (models) for the continuing conversion of the church. This work does not stand in opposition to the desire for competence in the performance of liturgical actions, it undergirds it, and simply reminds us that the things we can “see, touch and find” in a Christian liturgy are not the final purpose of our worship. They are mediations that symbolically open up a world of meaning and opportunity. Therefore desire for competence can serve a larger purpose: the reconciliation of the world to God in Christ. To this promise and reality we witness with our lives.

Emmaus had to “accept something monstrous for any good Jew” (*The Sacraments* 28), that God could still be the God of our ancestors even “if he raised up *someone who had been justly condemned* to death for having blasphemed against the Law of God given to Moses.” (*Symbol and Sacrament* 168). The depth of this conversion cannot be underestimated. In several places Chauvet speaks strongly of how this consent to the mediation of the church (the disclosure of God through scriptures included) is a “true trial.” (*Symbol and Sacrament* 171.)

⁸*The Sacraments*, 28

⁹*The Sacraments*, 153

For those who like more detail...

Three Key Texts : Three Theological Insights about the Passage to Faith

How does one become a believer?¹⁰ How does one acquire Christian identity? One major element of Chauvet's work is the assertion that people come-into-being, and understand their identity, within "language" and that people come-to-"be" *Christian* within the "language" of the Church. Chauvet sees Christian life as a constant process of *metanoia* – from a lack of faith to faithful witness. The process has many distinctive features, but here are three key characteristics found in Luke-Acts for the passage to faith. A person comes to faith and witness a) in the time of the church, b) at God's initiative, and c) through the mediation of the "language" of the church.

What follows is a study of three narratives from Luke-Acts, namely, A) The Road to Emmaus (Lk 24:13-35), B) The Road to Gaza (the Ethiopian's baptism in Acts 8:26-40) and C) The Road to Damascus (the first account of Paul's conversion in Acts 9:1-20). Having these texts before you may be helpful.

Chauvet draws attention to the parallelism between them on three counts. First, in all three cases Luke places the action, according to his own chronology and theology, *within the time of the church*. The Lord is no longer visible. Beginning from Jerusalem (cross, resurrection, ascension) and until he comes in glory, the time of the church must be a time of encounter and witness ("you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea, and to ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8)) in a particular place (on the road A: to Emmaus, B: to Gaza, C: to Damascus).

Second, all three narratives clearly show *an initiative on God's part*. The Lord is no longer recognizable, but the Triune God is still at work in the story.¹¹ In A: "Jesus himself came near and went with them." (Lk 24:15). In B: "the Spirit said to Philip, 'Go over to his chariot and join it.'" (Acts 8:29). In C: the intrusion into Paul's mission of the light and the voice of the risen, but not visible, Jesus.

Finally the third parallel characteristic is that in all three narratives "...this divine initiative, which alone allows the witnesses to accede to faith, happens through *the mediation of the church*."¹² The mediation itself is at three levels.

1. The first level of ecclesial mediation is speech. In A, on the road to Emmaus: the mediation is the *kerygma* of the church; the announcement by Jesus of his death and resurrection as *the key* to "all the scriptures."¹³ In B: the Ethiopian cannot read without a "guide" (which the Spirit provides and the church "is" – Philip, as a member of that "body".) In C: again it is the self-announcement of the crucified-resurrected One to Paul; the voice from heaven shows that he

¹⁰*Symbol and Sacrament*, 161

¹¹ Gerhard Sauter speaks of this "work" of prevenient grace as both a confronting presence and a leading promise. "God is present with us before we are aware of it. He acts in relation to us even before we are believers, even before we can speak meaningfully about belief and unbelief, even before we know what these terms signify. He has confronted us for a long time. Were we aware of it? Could we be before his message reached us? He is at work among us, but are we where he is? His promise leads us beyond ourselves into faith, hope, and love." Gerhard Sauter, *Gateways to Dogmatics: Reasoning Theologically for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2003) 129.

¹²*The Sacraments*, 21

¹³*The Sacraments*, 21.

is alive in his church (“I am Jesus whom you are persecuting” Acts 9:5). All of these show that the divine initiative sets in motion a movement to faith, which prompts the witnesses to request something: A: “Stay with us” (Lk 24:29) - B: “What is to prevent me from being baptized?” (Acts 8:36) - C: “What am I to do, Lord?” (Acts 22:9¹⁴) Here, as always, God – through the Word and the Spirit – is the mediator. “Speech” is the mediation.

2. “However,” Chauvet notes, “this faith remains incomplete as long as it is not ‘informed’ by a ‘sacramental’ gesture.”¹⁵ In A: the breaking of bread, in B: baptism, in C: the laying on of hands and baptism by Ananias.¹⁶ “Only then in A and C are the ‘eyes opened’, is the ‘sight’ restored.”¹⁷ Just as speech, the proclamation of the *kerygma* (as the key to the Scriptures) is the mediation in the first level, a gesture of offer and reception (as expressed by the elements – hands, bread, water,) is the mediation in the second level.¹⁸

3. The third level of mediation is often ignored in the interpretation of these texts: the eyes open, but they open on an absence. Chauvet shows that, “in A, the risen One disappears as soon as recognized; likewise in B, Jesus’ witness, Philip, is “snatched away” by the Spirit. This absence knows itself to be henceforth in-dwelt by a presence”¹⁹ And because this presence has become invisible, the witness is urged make their mission proclamation²⁰– they are urged to embody it.²¹ The passage to faith, which relies so heavily on the divine initiative and the Word’s interpretation, is incomplete without the gesture of reception and the act of witness, both of which are empowered by the Spirit.

One Key Chapter : Chapter 24 of the Gospel of Luke

The three theological insights explored above – that the action takes place in the time of the church, that the action is initiated by God, and that the action happens through three levels of

¹⁴From Paul’s account of his conversion in Acts

¹⁵*The Sacraments*, 21

¹⁶Note that Ananias’ involvement straddles the two levels because in addition to the “gesture” he speaks a word of interpretation. (Acts 8:17) The levels are distinct but overlap. More will be made of this further on.

¹⁷*The Sacraments*, 21

¹⁸Note the difference between mediator (God) and mediation (the language of the Church).

¹⁹*The Sacraments*, 21

²⁰The Ethiopian “went on his way rejoicing” which is a witness of sorts.

²¹Referring to the Emmaus text, Jean-Luc Marion makes the observation that this is a “self-referential hermeneutic of the texts by the Word.” Jean-Luc Marion *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, Thomas A. Carlson trans. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991 [1982 Fr.]) 149. He says this implies that “the Word interprets in person” but that this interpretation leaves us “blind” without our gesture of reception. This allows us to see that the self-referential hermeneutic and the breaking of the bread are *one* hermeneutic. “The one assures the other its condition of possibility.” 150 Marion is one of the few who also observes that “at the very moment of his recognition by the disciples, the Word in flesh disappears: “for it is to your advantage that I go away” (John 16:7). 151. For what? The disciples who have “seen him” now must “show him”; they now “occupy the eucharistic site of the Word, but their hermeneutic, in return, passes through every text and all speech, toward, again, the absolute referent (‘I am,’ Luke 24:38-39 = John 8:24 and 58 = Exodus 3;14)” 152. On this and the difficulty of believing see Jean-Luc Marion, “They Recognized Him; and He Became Invisible to Them.” In *Modern Theology* Vol. 18 no. 2, April 2002 (Oxford: Blackwell) 145-152.

mediation within the church (proclamation speech, gesture of reception, act of witness) – leads Chauvet to narrow his focus and refine his thesis based on the three sections of Chapter 24 of Luke – the announcement of the resurrection to the women at the tomb (vv 1-12), the story of Emmaus (vv.13-35), and the appearance to the disciples (vv. 36-49). These stories identify what Chauvet has calls “the temptation of immediacy” and the “paralyzing entombment” to which it leads. These stories also identify the liberating quality of that strange word spoken in the wake of an empty tomb.

Again, Chauvet is most interested in the patterns or the parallelism between the three. In all three cases the disciples involved begin with a desire “to find,” “to see,” “to touch” the body of Jesus. They want direct access to the truth. However, the women did not find the body, Peter saw only linen cloths and the disciples in their fear and doubt are prompted by Jesus to do that which they desired – to touch and see. Chauvet notes that these desires “all refer to the corpse of Jesus.”²²

The implication essentially poses a question; perhaps *the* question when faced with this empty tomb: what if they had found what they were looking for? The answer: *Jesus would still be dead*. And in that moment, expecting to find a corpse, faced with an empty tomb, “everything is at a standstill in their minds: they have allowed themselves to be shut up in the tomb of death with Jesus, and their difficulties are as heavy as the stone that closed the tomb.”²³ Thus, the followers of Jesus must be freed from this desire to find/see/touch in order to be transformed by the hearing of a word, and commissioned as witnesses to the Word.

This “freeing” is effected “by a recourse to the Scriptures.”²⁴ The disciples let the “stranger” take the initiative and speak. The two “men” in the tomb say to the women, “remember how he told you ... that the son of man must be handed over to sinners, be crucified, and on the third day rise again?” On the way to Emmaus, the stranger (Jesus) says, “how slow of heart to believe... was it not necessary...then beginning with Moses and all the prophets he interpreted to them the things about himself in all the scriptures.” With the disciples, Jesus says, “everything ... must be fulfilled ... thus it is written ...” In each case the followers have their minds opened by a new interpretation by the Word of God, according to what had been said and written.

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²²*The Sacraments*, 22 see also *Symbol and Sacrament*, 161,162

²³*The Sacraments*, 24. Theological reflection from the viewpoint of Easter Saturday (Christ dead in the tomb) can bear much fruit as witnessed in Alan E. Lewis’ *Between Cross and Resurrection: A Theology of Holy Saturday* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001). However, it bears fruit only because it illuminates all that Christ frees us from.

²⁴*The Sacraments*, 22 the “Scriptures” here includes the words of Jesus in their memory, since he spoke to them “directly” before his death.