

# *Sacramental Theology After **Laudato Si'***

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June, 2018

## *Introduction*

Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter With God*. 1960 on. (Dutch original *Das Sacramental Heilseconomie*.)

Table conversation, ahead of his time.

Pope Francis inaugural homily, March 19, 2013. “Care” by St. Joseph, to environment.

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco\\_20130319\\_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130319_omelia-inizio-pontificato.html)

*Laudato Si*, Pentecost Sunday, 2015. “On Care for Our Common Home.”

[http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)

An “encyclical” addressed to all for a “dialogue.”

## **1 – A Sacramental vision of the world.**

Limited value of Schillebeeckx, Rahner, Semmelroth etc.

Sacramentality means that to celebrate sacraments does not mean that we shun the world and all our fellow creatures. It means that in raising them up in worship we engage the world at a deep level of reality through which we experience nothing less than the living God. As Pope Francis says in *Laudato Si* (n. 235) to celebrate the sacraments “is to embrace the world on a different plane.”

The *first* reference to “sacrament” in *Laudato Si* is in its very first section from a quotation from Patriarch Bartholomew (n.4):

As Christians, we are also called “to accept the world as a sacrament of communion, as a way of sharing with God and our neighbours on a global scale. It is our humble conviction that the divine and the human meet in the slightest detail in the seamless garment of God’s creation, in the last speck of dust of our planet.”

From Tertullian on, a sacramental worldview.

Ecology on the ecumenical agenda: 1989 watershed: Orthodox, World Council of Churches, Roman Catholicism.

See, Kevin Irwin, "Ecology," Oxford Dictionary of Ecumenical Studies, online 2017.

Toward the end of *Laudato Si* the Pope will assert (n. 236):

It is in the Eucharist that all that has been created finds its greatest exaltation. Grace, which tends to manifest itself tangibly, found unsurpassable expression when God himself became man and gave himself as food for his creatures. The Lord, in the culmination of the mystery of the Incarnation, chose to reach our intimate depths through a fragment of matter. He comes not from above, but from within, he comes that we might find him in this world of ours. In the Eucharist, fullness is already achieved; it is the living centre of the universe, the overflowing core of love and of inexhaustible life. Joined to the incarnate Son, present in the Eucharist, the whole cosmos gives thanks to God. Indeed the Eucharist is itself an act of cosmic love: "Yes, cosmic! Because even when it is celebrated on the humble altar of a country church, the Eucharist is always in some way celebrated on the altar of the world" [quoting John Paul II]. The Eucharist joins heaven and earth; it embraces and penetrates all creation. The world which came forth from God's hands returns to him in blessed and undivided adoration: in the bread of the Eucharist, "creation is projected towards divinization, towards the holy wedding feast, towards unification with the Creator himself". Thus, the Eucharist is also a source of light and motivation for our concerns for the environment, directing us to be stewards of all creation.

## **2 – Sabbath rest, restoration and belonging.**

The *second* reference to a variation on the word "sacrament" in *Laudato Si* is to "sacramental signs" in the subtitle to the section in chapter six on "Ecological Education and Spirituality." The title of the specific subsection is "sacramental signs and the celebration of rest" (nn. 233-37). Here the pope links the Jewish Sabbath with our experience of Sunday, not only the Eucharist but also with "a day which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world" (n.237).

*Laudato Si*, n. 237:

On Sunday, our participation in the Eucharist has special importance. Sunday, like the Jewish Sabbath, is meant to be a day which heals our relationships with God, with ourselves, with others and with the world. Sunday is the day of the Resurrection, the "first day" of the new creation, whose first fruits are the Lord's risen humanity, the pledge of the final transfiguration of all created reality. It also proclaims "man's eternal rest in God". In this way, Christian spirituality incorporates the value of relaxation and festivity. We tend to demean contemplative rest as something unproductive and unnecessary, but this is to do away with the very thing which is most important about work: its meaning.

The Aparecida document from CELAM cites the uses of and cautions about the Internet (nn.486-88). The language of *Laudato Si*, n. 47 is forceful, compelling and also invitational to a different way of living with the Internet in check that is “to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously.”

The language of liturgy is plural pronouns. The language and reality of Catholic life is always about plural pronouns. The language and reality of Jewish life on which this is based is always plural pronouns.

In America one of the congenital difficulties has always been to jettison rugged individualism and individual freedoms with the common good and caring for one another just because we are each other.

Overwhelming individualism in sacramental practices, e.g. Confirmation. (See, Timothy R. Gabrielli, *Confirmation. How a Sacrament of God’s Grace Became All About Us*. Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2016.

### **3 – Sacramental mediation through creation and the Incarnation.**

In the final reference is to sacraments specifically in *Laudato Si* the pope asserts:

The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. Through our worship of God, we are invited to embrace the world on a different plane. Water, oil, fire and colours are taken up in all their symbolic power and incorporated in our act of praise. The hand that blesses is an instrument of God’s love and a reflection of the closeness of Jesus Christ, who came to accompany us on the journey of life. Water poured over the body of a child in Baptism is a sign of new life (LS 235).

There is a primalness to Catholic worship that stands alongside our use of prayers, which contain concepts, images and metaphors about God and our very human condition. But to lose, or even to eclipse, the primalness of liturgy is to cut ourselves loose from what is a characteristic mooring for the way we have always worshipped God—through fellow creatures and creation herself.

Every celebration of the liturgy is an act of “mediated immediacy.” This phrase is intended to mean that we experience God in the church’s most privileged moments and manner through all that dwells in this world, through human beings and through the use of rites and texts crafted by the church. One of the main values of the liturgy is that it invites us to a direct encounter and experience of God. Again it does so not by shunning the world, but by experiencing the elements of this earth as mediators of divine realities.

The triad —creation, incarnation, and mediation— should be kept in mind as we articulate our understanding of the principles of sacramental theology as influenced by *Laudato Si*, in order that sacraments can be appreciated in their theological depth.

#### **4 – Naming God, naming creatures and the interrelationship of all creatures on this good earth.**

God who acts.

We believe in the biblical God of the covenant, the God of creation and the God of redemption.

Easter Vigil prayer after proclamation of Gen. 9, Noah.

Deus, qui regeneratiónis spéciem  
in ipsa dilúvii effusióne signásti,  
ut uníus eiusdémque eleménti mystério  
et finis esset vítiis et orígo virtútum; (*Missale Romanum*, 43)

The biblical phrase “the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac and the God of Jacob” is really a short hand way of saying that God is a relational God.

*The acclaiming of the God of creation is supported by the way the liturgy often acclaim what we would regard as “things” as in fact “creatures.”*

Implications for liturgical / sacramental theology.

Dóminum Deum nostrum, fratres caríssimi, suppliciter  
deprecémur, ut hanc creatúram aquæ [*this creature water*] benedícere dignétur,  
super nos aspergéndam in nostri memóriam baptísmi.  
Ipse autem nos adiuváre dignétur, ut fidéles Spíritui,  
quem accévimus, maneámus. (n. 2)

The first lines of the blessing prayer itself read:

Deus, qui invisibili poténtia  
per sacramentórum signa miráblem operáris efféctum,  
et creatúram aquæ [*creature (of) water*] multis modis præparásti,  
ut baptísmi grátiam demonstráret; (n. 46)

Similarly when the priest adds salt to the water to be blessed he says:

Súplices te rogámus, omnípotens Deus,  
ut hanc creatúram salis [*this creature salt*]  
benedícere + tua pietáte dignéris,  
qui per Eliséum prophétam in aquam mitti eam iussísti,  
ut sanarétur sterílitas aquæ. (n. 3)

If in fact Pope Francis calls us to appreciate the “interrelationship of all” and that we are fellow creatures on this common home, then we need to examine the language we use to reflect the working of liturgy and sacrament. Rhetoric that speaks of “things” or “objects” “used” in worship needs to be rethought and our conventional categories about sacraments reenvisioned. This is to suggest, for example, that we should use rhetoric that acclaims, raises up, values and reveres God’s gifts to us in nature and as fellow beings on this earth. The opening words of *Laudato Si* themselves from the Cantic of the Creatures are an example (n.1):

“Praise be to you, my Lord”

Catholic social teaching has asserted, and under Pope Francis has repeatedly reiterated that everyone on the planet has an absolute right to potable water. In *Laudato Si* he argues that “fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems.” (LS 28 – 32 etc.)

In the Preliminary Document for the Synod to be held in October 2019 on the Amazon region it states that:

In this context, it is water – through its gorges, rivers, and lakes – that becomes the region’s organizing and integrating element, with its main axis being the Amazon, the mother and father river of all. Within such a diverse Amazonian

territory, it can be assumed that the different human groups that inhabit it have had to adapt to its different geographical, ecological, and political realities.

See,

<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/08/180608b.html>

## 5 – “The Work of human hands.”

Another aspect of valuing these fellow creatures on our common home is valuing humans. Specifically with regard to liturgy and sacraments how humans value and revere fellow creatures and how human ingenuity and productivity works with them. Manufactured goods such as bread and wine, oil carry with them levels of meaning about humanity.

Pope Francis reminds in *Laudato Si'* that humans are to “have dominion” over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), to “till it and keep it” (Gen 2:15). He deepens these assertions by saying in *Laudato Si'* (n.67):

We are not God. The earth was here before us and it has been given to us. This allows us to respond to the charge that Judaeo-Christian thinking, on the basis of the Genesis account which grants man ‘dominion’ over the earth (cf. Gen 1:28), has encouraged the unbridled exploitation of nature by painting him as domineering and destructive by nature. This is not a correct interpretation of the Bible as understood by the Church.

That these “works of human hands” are presented along with other gifts for the poor takes us back to the earliest description of what became the Roman liturgy: collect gifts for the poor, which acts of giving benefit the workers and donors.

In *Laudato si'* the pope links a theology of ecology with food distribution, especially for the poor.

In addition to concern for others’ immediate needs for food and drink there is the impoverishment that the earth itself can experience because of unfair work practices. In addition to reiterating Catholic social teaching on receiving a “just wage” (from Leo XIII)

*Rerum Novarum* on) pope Francis cites pollution, deforestation and ecological imbalances that result from unjust practices. For example he speaks about pollution in *Laudato Si'*, n. 20).

The celebration of sacramental liturgy does a number of things, among which are the following three.

First, it substantiates the contemporary emphasis on the theology of creation and places it on a truly theological ground in that it always stresses that the things of this earth used in liturgy are from God's goodness.

Second, sacramental liturgy prevents us from being pessimistic about the world and world events. By its very shape and structure sacramental liturgy is a ritual experience that reflects an optimistic approach to human life. In the end "all will be well." In the meantime we need sacramental liturgy to put the world into focus and perspective.

Third, sacramental liturgy articulates our belief that we worship God by raising up this good earth, fellow creatures on it and "the work of human hands." This means that sacramental liturgy is always both anthropological and cosmic; it articulates what we believe about the human person and the cosmos.

Or better, through sacramental liturgy human persons put their lives and the world itself into proper perspective. We use "daily and domestic things" in liturgy, specifically in bathing at baptism and in dining on the food of the Eucharist which sacramental signs are both from creation and the result of human productivity, which things reflect back on the goodness, generosity and largesse of the God we worship. We raise them up in sacramental liturgy to order into (what is sometimes) the chaos of human life and to set us in proper relation with the world and all who dwell in it.

## Notes