Lay Appropriation of the Sacraments in the later Middle Ages

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Perhaps the most crucial single utterance of the Second Vatican Council, at least in terms of impact on our shared experience as Catholics, occurs at paragraph 14 of the Council's constitution on the liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*. This was the first of the conciliar documents to be promulgated, and in many ways its most bloodily contested production. The paragraph in question runs like this:

> Mother Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy, and to which the Christian people, "a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a redeemed people" (1 Pet: 2: 9, 4-5.) have a right and obligation by reason of their baptism.
> In the restoration and promotion of the sacred liturgy the full and active participation by all the people is the aim to be considered before all else, for it is the primary and indispensable source from which the faithful are to derive the true Christian spirit. Therefore, in all their apostolic activity, pastors of souls should energetically set about achieving it through the required pedagogy.[1]

"Full, conscious and active participation", pastoral energy and liturgical pedagogy: these were momentous notions, laden with an agenda whose implications were sketched out in the rest of the document, and which were embodied in the reforms which followed. The summons to "active participation", indeed, a phrase which occurs sixteen times in all, was singled out subsequently as the main refrain of the document.[2] As anyone who has lived through the generation of change which flowed from this paragraph knows, those words were to have revolutionary implications for the character and celebration of Catholic liturgy and sacraments, as both rites and texts were revised and simplified so that the people "should be able to understand them with ease and take part in them fully, actively, and as a community".[3]

Only a fool or a Lefevrist would deny the flood of benefit which the post-conciliar liturgical reforms have brought, but only a fool or an ICEL groupie would maintain that the process has been an unmitigated blessing. We are only now, I think, beginning to be in a position to draw up a balance sheet of loss and gain from changes which were based on the assumption that the mysteries celebrated in the sacraments could or should be " understood with ease", that the liturgy was an activity concerned primarily with pedagogy, that liturgical rites

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should be "short, clear and free from useless repetitions",[4] or that "full, conscious and active participation" in worship and sacraments inevitably involved ritual regimentation, with everybody doing or saying or listening to the same things, at the same moment, all the time. Professor John Bossy has spoken of the " polyphonic mysteries" of the pre-reformation Mass,[5] and a stronger sense that the sacraments speak not univocally, but polyphonically, might well have served to raise serious questions about some of the principles and assumptions which underlay the transformations of our sacramental experience in the years since the Council, and to avert some of the more disastrous processes of simplification and "rationalisation" which those transformations have involved.

In this paper I want to bring history to bear on sacramental and liturgical theory, or rather, I want to challenge the version of history on which some of the theorising which underlay the post-conciliar liturgical reforms was constructed. Behind those reforms was an account of the nature of lay experience of the sacraments in the Middle Ages which I believe to have been quite profoundly mistaken. In the writings of the fathers of the liturgical movement, including those, like Joseph Jungmann, who played decisive roles in the shaping of Conciliar thinking about the liturgy, we find an account of medieval liturgy as a simple story of decline from the true liturgical participation of all the people during the patristic age, to subjective and incomprehending pietism in the later Middle Ages. The Middle Ages were seen as an era in which the liturgy and sacraments were overlayed with "fanciful interpretations and developments" foreign to their nature, thus preparing the way, in Louis Bouyer's words, "for the abandonment of the liturgy by Protestantism and its final disgrace and neglect in so much of post-tridentine catholicism".[6]

This reading of late medieval sacramental and liturgical experience can be found at its clearest and most explicit in Joseph Jungmann's important book *Pastoral Liturgy*, a collection of lectures and essays published as preparations for the Council were being put in train in 1960, and the English version of which appeared in 1962, as the schema which eventually became *Sacrosanctum Concilium* was being considered.[7] In an extended account of what he called a " revolution in religious culture" Jungmann traced the decay of the "close connection between altar and people" in the early Church " in which the people's Amen resounded like a peal of heavenly thunder" round the Roman basilicas, and in which a constant interplay and dialogue within the celebration culminated in universal communion, through the distancing and silencing of the laity which he believed took place in Carolingian Europe. Lay communion dwindled to a rarity reserved for special feast-days, the priest "consciously detache(d) himself from the congregation", and the people "only follow(ed) from a distance the external and visible action of the celebration in terms of its symbolic meaning", a process assisted and symbolised by the retention of Latin,

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so that the language of the liturgy became increasingly remote and incomprehensible. These ritual developments had their theological equivalents, as the cult of the crucified Jesus took over from that of the risen Christ, a sense of personal sinfulness and unworthiness overwhelmed the earlier consciousness of the baptismal dignity and sanctity of the Christian, with a consequent decline in frequency of communion, and there was an increasing emphasis "on the individual and upon what is subjective": in a word, the Teutonic triumphed over the Latin. According to Jungmann this process climaxed in the later Middle Ages when, despite the lush elaboration of the cult of the Blessed Sacrament and the boom in church building and decoration, a "broad gulf" separated clergy and laity, celebrations of the sacraments were no longer "a people's service in the old sense", and at them "the people were not much more than spectators". Liturgy dwindled to pious theatre, and "the fundamental mystery itself, the sacramental making present of the work of salvation, the Mysterium Christi which ought to enfold us, and into which we ought to enter deeper and deeper", ceased to be grasped. No longer, declared Jungmann, was "the Christian mystery seen as something very much present, as the leaven which must constantly penetrate and transform Christianity". Instead, it was perceived "almost entirely as an event of the past upon which to meditate more and more deeply by means of such laudable devotions as the Way of the Cross or the Rosary"[4].

Jungmann was a great scholar, and with the broad outlines of his picture of the transformation of liturgical and sacramental celebration I would not wish to quarrel. The key developments to which he points, here and elsewhere in his writings, are real enough—the failure to translate the Mass into the germanic and frankish vernaculars, the screening of the altar, the disastrous emergence of low Mass, and the appropriation of the chants in sung Masses to professionalised choirs, the promotion of allegorical interpretation of ritual gesture, the tendency to emphasise the objective work of the sacraments, at the cost of eclipsing their symbolic dimension, and hence to adopt as normative the minimum ritual requirements for their valid celebration. The classic case here is baptism, where the sign of total immersion in living, flowing water was ultimately reduced to the trickling of a spoonful or two of oily and not very clean standing water onto the child's head. All these certainly contributed to a profound transformation in lay experience of the sacraments and the liturgy in general, an experience which, in the senses intended by Jungmann, did indeed become less articulate and proactive.

Where Jungmann's analysis seems to me to fall down, and to fall down disastrously, is in his assumption that in this whole process the laity and their local clergy were passive and inert, progressively excluded from an understanding of the "true" meaning of the sacraments and from participation in the "right" sort of liturgical celebration, at the mercy of the reduced and impoverished sacramental

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and liturgical catechesis offered by the medieval church, so that they became, in Jungmann's phrase, "not much more than spectators". This assumption was to prove crucial for the character of *modern* liturgical revision, for it resulted in a conception of one of the principal tasks of liturgical reform as that of improved catechesis. Louis Bouyer declared in his influential book *Life and Liturgy* that "the liturgy is to be considered as the central treasury containing all doctrinal tradition, and is, as Pius XI once said in a golden sentence, the 'principal organ of the ordinary magisterium of the Church' ".[9] That reference to the liturgy as the vehicle for the "ordinary magisterium", which Bouyer characterises as a golden sentence, we may be forgiven for thinking a chilling one. There is of course an obvious sense in which it is true: the liturgy, in which the scripture is read, reflected on and preached, and the sacraments celebrated, is plainly the principal means of transmission of the tradition of the community. But "magisterium" and "tradition" are very different concepts, and equally obviously, the notion that the celebration of the liturgy and sacraments is designed to put across a *message*, which may be straight-forwardly right or wrong and which can be summarised in catechesis, bristles with problems. Yet I suspect that some such notion lies behind the Council's stipulation that, for educational reasons, a "noble simplicity" was to be the key-note of all liturgical reform, and it has certainly underlain much of the relentless didacticism which characterises so many modern celebrations of the liturgy, in which we are *directed* to the meanings which we are to take away, either from the rite or from the readings.

But in fact liturgy rarely works by simplicity, as such. It works by symbolic word and gesture, and it is of the essence of a symbol, as opposed say to an allegory, that it is polyphonic, polysemous. Consider the water of baptism. Its Christian meaning is established and defined by use and context—by reference to scripture certainly, but by scripture as it is employed in the liturgy of baptism, supremely, for Catholics, in the liturgy of Easter night. Reflect on the words and actions of the liturgy for the Easter Vigil, especially the vigil in the form it took at its first restoration by Pius XII in the early 1950s, and you will see from its contexts there that the water of baptism holds a bewildering range of meanings, all of them important for a grasp of what the sacrament itself is, yet many of them consorting awkwardly, and some of them apparently contradictory. The baptismal water is the water of washing, it is the stream for which the parched deer longs, it is the rivers of Eden in the beginning and the water of healing and life in the garden of Paradise at the end of the world, it is the salt water of chaos over which the Spirit hovers, it is pools of sweet water in the desert, it is the nurturing water protecting the unborn child, it is the destructive water of Noah's Flood on which the Ark of the church floats, it is the rain which which drowns the sins of the earth, it is the rain which moistens the dryness of parched grass, it is the Red Sea

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which brings life to fleeing Israelites and death to pursuing Egyptians, it is the wine of Cana and the water of Jordan, it is semen, it is oil, it is milk and honey, it flows from the rock, it flows from the Temple, it flows from Christ's side, it is a cistern, it is a fountain, it is for drinking, for washing, for crossing, for drowning, for judgement, for mercy, for escaping from, for escaping into, it makes an end, it marks a beginning, it is a womb, it is a tomb.

Meaning in the sacraments, therefore, is rarely characterised by "noble simplicity", (though of course complex networks of meaning can be and often are evoked by simple gestures) for liturgies don't work at a simple or a single level. That is why they can rarely simply be invented, and why we should attempt to rationalise or streamline them only with caution and always at our peril. Rituals are by their very nature traditional, inherited, for to make a symbolic gesture we must always harness and stretch existing and inherited patterns of meaning. Liturgies, therefore, are palimpsests which grow by accretion, by the overlaying and juxtaposition of layer upon layer of meaning and sign, which are often in tension with each other, and held together not by a single dominant explanation but by performance, by the complex of recitation, repetition, song, prayer and gesture through which we appropriate and enter into the web of realities symbolised within the rite, by which we live within the tradition.

None of this is arbitrary, of course, for the range of possible meanings in any rite is limited by the restraint of the tradition, and by the juxtapositions and patternings of meanings within its variety. We are never in the position of Humpty Dumpty:

> 'When I use a word', Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, 'it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.'
> 'The question is', said Alice, 'whether you can make words mean so many different things.'
> 'The question is', said Humpty Dumpty, 'which is to be master—that's all'.[10]

We are never the masters of the meaning of the liturgy, and no one performance yields or exhausts all the meanings of a rite. That is why sacramental rites are probably better when they are at least a little complicated than when they are "simple", because they are by their very nature complex repositories of, or better, vehicles for, a whole range of meanings, not all of which any individual, congregation or even generation will be able to appropriate or grasp. To attempt to eliminate from our liturgies what we do not understand or cannot presently appropriate is always fraught with danger, for it runs the risk of reducing the polyphony of the rite to a thin monotone. As Peter Cramer put it in a fascinating study of patristic and medieval baptismal rites, "Liturgy is a job-lot. It is a structure only in a loose sense. Some

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bits of it may be ignored at some times, stressed at others. Sometimes it is barely a structure at all: it is just bits and pieces that come to hand, that happen to be there, and which can be put together in many ways".[11]

And yet, as that last remark suggests, we are always not merely the inheritors or executants, but the makers of the rituals, however traditional, however prescribed, which we use. The couple in love who dance a slow waltz are running through the prescribed steps of a dance—yet they are not merely *following* the waltz, but doing it, and it is part of their courtship, an expression of their feeling for each other. What is true of the dance is truer of liturgy: dances are often complicated, but liturgies are always complex. And even more than in the dance, we are the makers of the rites we employ. We *make* ritual, even inherited and prescribed ritual, because we bring to it a network of association and intention which shapes its meaning for us. Every rite is our own work of art, and in every celebration of the liturgy there is always more going on than the words, rubrics or intentions of the celebrant or the liturgists explicitly envisage.

Viewed in this light, the complex and elaborate liturgies of the Christian past, in particular of the Middle Ages, don't look so obviously decadent or impervious to lay appropriation, and the designer-crafted, carefully focussed liturgies of the post-conciliar Church look less like a restoration of primitive liturgical purity than an assault on the necessary polysemic character of liturgy. Carried to extremes, the rationale behind ritual simplification and redesign can amount to an act of profound schism of sensibility with and comprehension of the human and Christian past, which can amount to a real breakdown of Catholic communion. Readers of *The Tablet* may have been struck, as I was, by an account in the issue for the 8th of July of the complaint along these lines made by the architect Austin Winkley about the unreformed state of the liturgical space in Westminster Cathedral. "A Cathedral today", Mr Winkley is reported as saying, "should be a didactic centre. It is the chair of the bishop and his teaching. Here we have a Cathedral, the most important in the land, that has not been permanently reordered, and is therefore setting a bad example. *How do we live out our faith through the liturgy and sacraments in that place?*"[12] These emphases, a million miles away from Eliot's injunction to kneel, "here, where prayer has been valid", are familiar, for they recur again and again in apparently well-meaning but ultimately crass attempts to rework and "purify" the liturgy so that it becomes modern: not to wrestle with the inherited complexity, and so to tap the meaning and resource encoded in the rite, but to start with a clean slate . Note the concepts explicitly or implicitly present in Mr Winckley's reported remarks: didacticism, simplification, restructuring, and a sense of the necessary elimination of the mark of the past in the celebrations of the present, tradition envisaged as a prison-house rather than a power-house. It was Humpty Dumpty, you

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may recall, who told Alice when she could not remember the last remark but one, "In that case we start fresh". In liturgy, above all, we may indeed have forgotten, may even have laboured to forget, the last remark but one, but we never start fresh, for really to do so would be to be struck dumb.

By now you may be forgiven if you are asking what all this has to do with the lay appropriation of the sacraments in the Middle Ages. I think it goes like this. Jungmann marvelled that at the end of the Middle Ages there was a great deal of liturgical business, with the Christian people highly active in attending the rites on offer. Yet in a fundamental sense, he thought that beneath this hectic activity, nothing whatever was actually going on—the liturgy was a slot-machine from which people expected to derive material benefits: it was not, however, something in which, in any real sense, they were involved. For Jungmann there was no lay appropriation of the sacraments—they did not appropriate, make their own, the sacraments, they watched or consumed them. The liturgy, he wrote, was no longer understood in its sacramental depth, and "lay unused".[13]

Jungmann was measuring medieval appropriation of the liturgy and sacraments not in its own terms, as a manifestation of a particular moment of Christian culture, of equal value with every other moment of Christian culture, but by a paradigm, real or illusory I am not competent to judge, derived from an idealised account of the liturgy of the patristic era. For him, there was a right and a wrong way of using the liturgy, of celebrating the sacraments: by implication, and with whatever qualification, the reform of the liturgy meant a return to or recovery of this paradigm. Because medieval Christians were not participating in the liturgy as fourth century Romans had done, because they were not singing the chants and thundering out the responses, they were doing nothing at all, they were passive . But if instead of imposing such a paradigm onto the Middle Ages, and so finding it wanting, we attend to the particular quality, character and modes of lay experience of the sacraments in those centuries, a radically different and much more positive picture emerges, and one which, as I hope will become evident, has implications for our own understanding and performance of liturgy.

The first thing to be said about medieval experience of the sacraments was that far from being individualistic, as Jungmann thought, it was profoundly social: in a Christian society, the sacraments were understood as impinging directly on the life of the polis, providing both the cement which bound people together, and, on occasion, the solvents for undesirable forms of anti-social alliance over against the polis. This theme has been much explored by social and religious historians in the context of the Corpus Christi processions and play-cycles which are such a feature of late medieval urban life.[14] On some accounts these processions expressed and assisted the harmony of society, as the carrying of the body of Christ around the

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boundaries of the town expressed its corporate identity and unity, and united rival gilds and other sub-groupings in a common allegiance . Here the Pauline injunction to endeavour to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace took concrete form. John Bossy has memorably characterised this use of the sacraments to heal the feuds and divisions of society "the social miracle".[15] A less benign reading of these processions sees them as intrinsically contested and conflictual, events in which nearness or distance from the Host in the procession became the measure of social status, and in which rival individuals and groups jostled for position, and harnessed the sacrament to the quest for power or recognition. In fact both these readings of the nature of the medieval celebration of Corpus Christi seem to me to encapsulate important dimensions of the reality of the Eucharist, which is simultaneously the sacrament of our brokenness and of our unity, the enactment of the handing over to death of the Son of God by the rest of humanity, and the reconstitution of humanity in his death and resurrection. In that sense the sometimes ferocious rivalries which underlay the ritual unities of medieval Corpus Christi processions are a truer enactment of the eschatological hope of the eucharist for the healing of the sin of the world than the enforced and cloying friendliness of many modern celebrations of the eucharist, which dissolve the "now but not yet" of the unity which the eucharist promises, into an illusion of present and achieved harmony—eucharistic unity as the togetherness of the like-minded, the Mass and therefore the Church reduced to a golf-club or a Conservative association supper.

The eucharist was by no means the only sacrament which was encountered and celebrated by medieval people as the maker or healer of society. The healing of social divisions and the creation of alliances through marriage, what one might call the Romeo and Juliet effect, is a case in point. Peter Cramer has drawn attention to the way in which the baptisteries of medieval Italian cities, and the liturgies celebrated in them, became the expression of overarching unity within the context of feuding clans. The existence of a single baptistery for a whole city was of course a consequence of its original status as an episcopal sacrament, and the celebration of all baptisms at Easter and Pentecost. But in the medieval town, where local churches were often in origin and use family chapels, private, clan or factional sanctuaries, the common baptistery enacted that unity over faction to which the human city aspired but which remained in practice an ideal imperfectly achieved. In the baptisteries, often modelled on the Holy Sepulchre or actually using mausoleum buildings, the strife of the human city was buried, and the future unity of the *civita*, heavenly Jerusalem, was born. The breaking down of the barriers of hatred, incomprehension and division, which the death of Christ effected and the sacrament of baptism celebrated, was here given a concrete reality within a society which recognised the heavenly city as the source and goal of human community.[16]

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In a different way, John Bossy has traced the development of the institution of godparentage in medieval Europe, as lay people, despite the resistance of the clergy, pressed the institution of baptismal sponsorship into service as a means of transcending natural kinship alliances and creating wider relationships of protection, support and friendship in a feuding society: the sacrament of baptism established a network of relationship which disarmed hostility and brought unity and peace. The English believed that the Irish chose wolves as godparents, because the friendship so created would oblige the wolf to do them no harm, a belief, as Bossy remarks, which is as interesting if the English were mistaken as if they were right.[17]

Theologians and pastors, as might be expected, often viewed such lay transformations of sacramental experience as abuses, "wrong" or inappropriate use of the sacraments, and social historians in modern times have been inclined to follow this lead. Lay use of the words, ceremonies and materials of sacramental worship, for example in rituals of healing, has often been seen as superstitious or magical, the distortion of the real Christian meaning of the sacraments to achieve some lesser and often misguided end, and a proof of the gulf between popular religion and that of the clergy and the elite. Jungmann himself, as we have seen, subscribed to something like this view. I don't want to enter into the particularities of that debate now, though elsewhere I have argued that much that has been taken to be magical or superstitious in late medieval religion can in fact be shown to employ in a perfectly cogent way the ideas and ritual strategies found in the liturgy itself, and so should be viewed not as pagan survival or superstition, but as lay Christianity.[18] Modern historians of religion have been intrigued by the generation round the sacraments proper of a penumbra of sacrament-like blessings and sacred objects and actions, over which lay people had more control than over the clerically managed sacraments themselves. The multiplication of such sacramentals has been seen by historians and theologians, as it sometimes was by reform-minded contemporaries like Nicholas of Cusa, as a symptom of disorder and superstition, a departure from what was central to the peripheral.[19] The point I want to make here is that in fact this sort of medieval sacramental or para-liturgical activity, properly understood, often demonstrates not a disfunctional displacement within the liturgy, the exaltation of marginal elements over those which are central, but a profound sacramental wisdom and a vigorously Christian sacramental culture. I want to illustrate this from two examples, both derived from the same eucharistic para-liturgical institution or sacramental, the distribution of holy or blessed bread after Mass.

Jungmann thought that medieval perceptions of the eucharist were the crux and key of all that was wrong with their understanding of liturgy and sacraments. The "eucharistic movement" which produced the great celebrations of Corpus Christi was not in his view "an

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approach to the Blessed Sacrament" but rather a "withdrawal from it", not the *use* of the sacrament but its *cult*, in which excessive concentration on the eucharistic presence eclipsed every other dimension of the sacrament.[20] The proof of this for him was the reduction of lay communion to an annual event. To compensate for this, a series of communion substitutes emerged. England's distinctive contribution to this process was the invention in the thirteenth century of the "Instrumentum Pacis" or Pax-Board—a book, plaque or painting of some sacred symbol, such as the lamb of God, which was kissed by the celebrant and then carried round the congregation to be kissed in their turn, at the Agnus Dei. The practice spread from England to the rest of Christendom. Even more evidently a communion substitute was the custom of distributing pieces of blessed but unconsecrated bread at to the people at the end of the main parish Mass on a Sunday. The baskets of bread used were blessed by the recitation of the first fourteen verses of St John's Gospel together with a prayer over them. They were then cut up and distributed. The blessed bread was believed to have healing and protective powers, and so was used in healing rites for human beings and animals, and it was supposed to be the first food one tasted on a Sunday morning. In many places strict order of seniority or social clout within the parish was observed in this distribution, householders going before servants or labourers, and in some places the pieces of bread were distributed in graded sizes. Congregations felt strongly about the social proprieties involved in this distribution, and the ritual was often the focus of conflict and litigation.[21] Here, if anywhere, one might think, was a clear example of disfunction within the liturgy, in which an unscriptural sacramental has displaced meanings and functions properly belonging to the Holy Eucharist itself, and has gathered round it in the process a cluster of superstitions and dubious social functions.

The first example I want to examine in order to suggest that this is not so comes from the stormy events surrounding the Peasants Revolt of 1381 in England, the rebellion of Wat Tyler, Jack Straw and John Ball. That rebellion in itself had eucharistic resonances—it erupted decisively, surely by prearrangement, on the feast of Corpus Christi, June 13th 1381, and historians have recently become intrigued by the interplay between the social dimensions of that feast and the social breakdown expressed in the Rising.[22] Our fullest information about the revolt focusses on St Alban's, where a monk of the Abbey, Thomas de Walsingham, produced several exceptionally full and detailed accounts of the course of the rising.[23] The grievances of the Commons at St Albans were varied, but one important issue was the Abbey's much resented monopoly on the milling of flour. An earlier Abbot had succeeded in forcing the local tenantry to surrender the small domestic mill-stones used for grinding flour at home, and, in token of this assertion of the Abbey's control over milling, had the confiscated mill-stones set in the floor of the monastery parlour. During the rebellion,

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therefore, a mob of the Commons, armed with the implements of their trades, burst into the monastery, marched to the parlour and dug the stones out of the floor. In an extraordinary ritual, they proceeded to break the mill-stones up, and distributed a piece to each of the men present to take home. The monastic chronicler was much struck by this action, and recognised in it a deliberate reference to the distribution of blessed bread at parish Mass on Sundays: the Commons took the particles of stone home, he declared "that seeing the pieces, they might remember that they had once triumphed in this dispute with the Monastery": he went on to lament the damage to the monastery in a cluster of phrases from the psalms which ring the changes on the eucharistic images of bread, corn and sheaves.[24]

I don't want to enter here into the complicated question of the rights and wrongs of the grievances of the commons of St Albans against the Abbey in 1381. What I want to draw your attention to is the extraordinary and assured power of their deployment of para-eucharistic ritual to express their sense of injustice, and its setting to rights. The sensitivity to social order and decorum which generally characterised the distribution of Holy Bread is here revealed not as a sub-christian preoccupation with power and status, but as an attempt to reflect an ideal and just ordering of society, in which the fragment of stone becomes what in the Corpus Christi antiphon *O Sacrum Convivium* St Thomas calls the bread of the Eucharist itself, a "pignus", a token, sign and down-payment of a hoped-for reality, at once a reminder of liberation achieved and a standing testimony to the power of that victory in the present and the future. For the commons of St Alban's in June 1381 the victory and freedom celebrated in the Mass was in some very concrete sense reflected in their protest against the oppression of the Abbey which put an unjust price on their daily bread. I do not think it entirely fanciful to see here something like a liberation theology derived from their eucharistic experience, and which they instinctively and eloquently expressed in eucharistic imagery.

My second example, which also centres on the Holy-Bread ritual, is one which I have used elsewhere, and I apologise to any of you to whom it is familiar already.[25] It concerns the resolution of conflict in the small Bristol church of St Ewens in the early 1460s. The Church derived much of its income from the rent of shops and tenements in the town centre, and the church-wardens were locked in an expensive and long-drawn out dispute with one wealthy parishioner, the corn merchant John Sharp, over the rental of one of these properties. It was finally resolved in January 1464, and in token of restored charity Sharp changed his will to include a handsome donation to parish funds, in return for which he, his wife Elizabeth, and deceased members of their family, were entered in the Church's bede-roll to be prayed for publicly as benefactors . On the following Sunday, as it happened, it was the turn of the Sharp household to provide the loaf which would

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be used for the Holy-Bread ritual. There was a prescribed ceremony for presenting this bread, which happened before Matins and Mass began. On the Sunday in question Elizabeth Sharp turned up in pomp, accompanied by a maid who carried the bread and the candle which was offered with it, and also a long embroidered linen towel. This was a "houselling towel", the long cloth held under the chins of communicants at the annual parish reception of communion at Easter. Having duly presented the holy loaf, Mistress Sharp summoned the parson and the chief parishioners. She expressed her great joy at the restoration of unity and charity within the parish and between her family and the rest of the community, and she donated the towel as a sign of that restored unity. Up till then, the parish had not owned a cloth long enough for the purpose, and had pinned three short cloths together. The unity of the new towel symbolised that the peace which had been established in the community was no patched up affair, but a seamless whole, and it was to be used on the one day of the year in which the whole community celebrated and cemented its unity by the reception of the eucharist. Once again, what is striking here is the sophisticated harnessing by a lay person, in this case a woman, of a powerful cluster of eucharistic symbols—the moment of the presentation of the holy loaf, the replacement of a patched and pinned assortment of towels by a single communion cloth, the reception of Easter Communion—to express the restoration of unity, charity and justice in the community.

There are of course a great many sub-texts here: in both incidents there is a lot more than theology going on, and one might want to say a good deal about the jostling for prestige and status in the community which is implicit in Elizabeth Sharp's swanky gesture. But whatever else is in evidence here, both incidents seem to me to display a practical eucharistic theology of a very high order, a eucharistic theology, moreover, which is by no means mesmerised, as Jungmann thought late medieval thinking about the eucharist was, by the single issue of the real presence, but which is alert to the sense in which the eucharist both symbolises and makes community. Jungmann complained that the late medieval laity had little sense of the way in which the sacramental mystery "made present the work of salvation", yet that seems to me to be precisely what is so strongly in evidence in both these stories.

Of course, there is no denying that in both incidents there is evidence of one very uncomfortable displacement in the eucharistic practice of the late medieval Church. It could perfectly properly be argued that both these clusters of eucharistic symbolism have attached themselves to an element of the rite which was only present because the people had ceased to receive the true "Holy Bread", the eucharistic Body of Christ itself: a sacramental has displaced the true sacrament. No doubt this is so, but if so we need to reflect on the extraordinary richness and social realism of their eucharistic theology despite this

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displacement, and its closeness to the concerns and preoccupations which Paul articulates in talking about celebrations of the eucharist at Corinth. We are recognisably in touch with New Testament themes, as well as the preoccupations of the English parishioners of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. At the very least we have proof here of the theological resourcefulness of the laity in a period when the liturgy might at first sight seem to have been wholly and exclusively appropriated by the clergy: Jungmann's perception of the late medieval scene was too elitist, too much mesmerised by what was going on at the altar and among the clergy.

I am very conscious of the partial nature of my discussion of the sacraments and the laity in the Middle Ages. Had I started this discussion, as at one stage I had planned to do, with the sacrament of matrimony, the whole dynamic of the paper would have been altered, for there it was not so much a question of the laity appropriating a sacrament offered to them by the Church, and directing it towards their own needs and preoccupations, as of the Church trying, often vainly, to tame and sacralise energies and institutions which predated it and could not easily be accommodated within its thinking. With the other sacraments, it was a question of moving out of the sanctuary—ultimately carrying the Blessed Sacrament along with them—into the world beyond. With matrimony, the last of the sacraments—so far—to be recognised, the movement is the other way, from a rite celebrated in the home or at the threshold between Church and world, the Church porch, into the sanctuary—a comparatively recent movement into the Church, which the apparent collapse of marriage even among many who would describe themselves as Christian appears to be about to reverse. And yet, odd case out as it is, marriage has some claims to be the paradigmatic case of lay appropriation of the sacraments, at any rate in the dimension I have been considering, of the sacralising of the life of people together, of society. Once again, it is at least in part a story of the resourcefulness of the Christian people, for the clerical Church had difficulty in giving a positive value to sex, procreation and the structures of family life: there was no cult of the Holy Family in the early Church. Fascinatingly, when that cult came in the Middle Ages it was not at first as we now know it and as successive modern Popes have endorsed it, the nuclear family envisaged as a single boy-child, a virgin and an impotent old man. For the Middle Ages the Holy Family was the matriarchal, vastly-extended and largely female or pre-pubertic family constituted by the three daughters and the multiple grandchildren of that much married lady St Anne, the mother of Mary. The cult of St Anne in the Middle Ages is part of the story of the determination of lay people, against clerical and theological resistance, to celebrate as holy, as sacrament, their experience of sexuality, child-bearing, marriage, and even remarriage.

We don't live in the Middle Ages, and I am wary of drawing too many applications from what I have had to say here. But at least it

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seems clear to me that the assessment offered by Jungmann and others of the quality of the sacramental life of Christians in the medieval period was both far too negative and far too patronising. Ironically, given Jungmann's desire to give the Mass back to the people, it was rooted at least in part in clerical elitism, for he and the other founders of the liturgical movement saw the restoration of the liturgy as a task involving a return to the "true" values to be uncovered in the fathers and the early liturgical texts by an elite corps of experts.[26] More seriously, that negative assessment of medieval liturgy helped nourish a programmatic and abstract sense of how liturgy "worked". Too much attention was paid to text and rubric in liturgical rites, too little to the concrete embedding of liturgy in social reality, and the complex uses to which the Christian people actually put the language of liturgy and sacrament. In the process, liturgical theorists underestimated the value of the para-liturgical proliferation of secondary rites, and what was thought of as the clutter of sacramentals which, if my reading of the evidence has any validity, were signs not of decadence but of vigorous lay appropriation of the meaning of the sacraments. As a result, liturgists failed to grasp the hospitality to such diverse and dynamic use and appropriation of the sacraments which was afforded by the very complexities and bagginess of the medieval rites which they deplored. For the lay appropriation of the sacraments, which I hope I have persuaded you was both resourceful and theologically profound, often fixed on those very elements within the liturgy which the liturgists judged to be marginal, and which modern reforms have planed away as accretions and corruptions, in the name of "noble simplicity" and too narrow and fundamentalist an understanding of the return to sources.

At the very least, then, I am appealing for second thoughts about "noble simplicity", and for a more reverential and receptive attitude to tradition in this area above all, a greater respect for the quality of the experience of the Christian mystery among our predecessors in the faith, and so a second look at and maybe a reappropriation of dimensions of their sacramental and liturgical experience which were set aside in the post-conciliar sense of new beginnings. We can't of course reinvent the Middle Ages, anymore than we can or would want to re-invent the Counter-Reformation Church. But then, we can't reinvent the early Church either. It should be evident from what I have said that the Christian society in which the sacraments were celebrated by medieval Christians differed radically from ours in possessing an infinitely richer and more varied pool of shared symbolism than we do. They inhabited a symbolic culture, shaped by Christianity, and so sufficiently coherent, for all its fissures and variety, for the language of liturgy to resonate, even if to different notes, at every level of society. Our dilemma as a Church is the dilemma of our culture, the disintegration of a shared set of symbols. As a Church we must somehow find means of reforging a language which draws life,

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continuity and focus from the tradition, but which is also hospitable to the new meanings and new tasks which the evangelisation of our world—and ourselves—demands. What I am certain of is that as a religious culture the Church itself needs to become more hospitable, more receptive to symbol, not least to the symbols which it already possesses. The cultivated austerity of much modern liturgy springs less from theological roots than from a mixture of philistinism and puritanism which is as inimical to celebration as it is to lamentation, which mistakes individualistic intensity for sincere public utterance, and which is so often informed by a disturbing and baffling hostility to the cultural forms in which inherited Christian experience and wisdom has been transmitted. Yet the infinite resourcefulness of that tradition is at least one antidote to the bleak dilemma articulated in David Jones' devastating and fragmentary poem **A a a Domine Deus.**

I said Ah! what shall I write?
I enquired up and down.
(He's tricked me before
with his manifold lurking-places.)
I looked for his symbol at the door.
I have looked for a long while
at the textures and contours.
I have run a hand over the trivial intersections.
I have journeyed among the dead forms
causation projects from pillar to pylon.
I have tired the eyes of the mind
regarding the colours and the lights.
I have felt for his Wounds
in nozzles and containers.
I have wondered for the automatic devices.
I have tested the inane patterns
without prejudice.
I have been on my guard
not to condemn the unfamiliar.
For it is easy to miss Him
at the turn of a civilization.

I have watched the wheels go round in case I might see the living creatures like the appearance of lamps, in case I might see the Living God projected from the Machine. I have said to the perfected steel, be my sister and for the glassy towers I thought I felt some beginnings of His creature but *A a a Domine Deus* my hands found the glazed work unrefined and the terrible crystal a stage-paste....*Eia Domine Deus.*[27]

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2 J A Jungmann, "Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy", in H. Vorgrimler, ed., *Commentary on the Documents of Vatican II*, New York 1967 p 17.
3 SC 21.
4 SC 34.
5 J Bossy, "The Mass as a Social Institution", *Past and Present* 100, p 61.
6 Louis Bouyer, *Life and Liturgy*, London 1956 p 15.
7 For the importance of Jungmann's views in determining the character of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, see Annibale Bugnini, *The Reform of the Liturgy 1948–1975*, Collegeville, Minnesota 1990, p 12.
8 J A Jungmann, *Pastoral Liturgy*, London 1962 pp 1–101.
9 *Life and Liturgy*, p 31.
10 Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, chapter vi.
11 Peter Cramer, *Baptism and Change in the Early Middle Ages*, Cambridge 1993 pp 242–3. My thinking about this whole topic owes a good deal to this lively and stimulating book.
12 *The Tablet*, July 1995, pp 867–8.
13 *Pastoral Liturgy*, p 73.
14 For which see, for example, Miri Rubin, *Corpus Christi*, Cambridge 1991.
15 J Bossy, *Christianity in the West 1400–1700*, Oxford 1985, ch 4.
16 *Cramer, Baptism and Change*, pp 267–290.
17 Bossy, *Christianity in the West*, pp 15–6.
18 E Duffy, *The Stripping of the Altars*, New Haven and London 1992, chap 8.
19 See the discussion of the relation between "official" liturgy and the sacramentals in R W Scribner, *Popular Culture and Popular Movements in Reformation Germany*, London 1987 pp 17–47.
20 *Pastoral Liturgy* p 63
21 For all this, *The Stripping of the Altars*, pp 125–7.
22 For example Margaret Aston, "Corpus Christi and Corpus Regni: Heresy and the Peasant's Revolt", *Past and Present* 143 (1994) pp 3–47.
23 R B Dobson, (ed) *The Peasants Revolt of 1381*, London 1983, pp 29ff.
24 H T Riley (ed) *Gesta Abbatum Monasterii Sancti Albani a Thoma Walsingham*, vol 3, London 1869, pp 308–9.
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26 See Annibale Bugnini's revealing remark that the liturgical movement was "a fruit produced by the thought and prayer of elite minds and then gradually shared with ever wider circles of the faithful"—*Reform of the Liturgy*, p 3.
27 John Matthias (editor) *Introducing David Jones: a selection of his writings*, London 1980, p 31; reproduced by kind permission of Faber & Faber Ltd.

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