

**The Holiness of the Ordinary:
The Liturgy of the World**
Mary Aquin O’Neill, RSM, Ph.D.

Let me begin by saying what a joy it is for me to be with the Church of St. Agnes. I have heard about you for many years now, and have followed your life through communications with your pastor and my friend, Father Nigel Wright.

I come to you today as a catholic Christian theologian, hoping to share insights from more than a quarter century of wrestling with what our inherited faith teaches us about the mystery of being human. I come as a woman raised in the deep south of the United States in a devout Roman Catholic family, inspired at an early age to a religious vocation as a Sister of Mercy, formed by a community of women dedicated to the service of the “poor, sick, and ignorant,” catapulted into the women’s liberation movement through graduate studies in the late sixties and early seventies, bruised by years of trying to make room for the perspectives of women in institutions dominated by male assumptions, renewed by the opportunity to create a home for women’s ways of knowing and acting at a theological center for women. All of this and more has shaped me as a catholic Christian theologian. It informs the presentation I give this evening.

One more word of preface: when I use the term catholic Christian, I intend those Christian traditions for whom the liturgical and sacramental life is central. For me, the term is by no means co-extensive with Roman Catholic. Catholic is also a term connoting an inclusiveness that embraces not only geography and time, but human endeavors, especially the arts.

I have been asked to speak about the relationship between the life we call ordinary and the

sacraments and liturgy of the Church. Setting it up this way, of course, makes the latter seem extraordinary--out of the ordinary. This framework while true, may be misleading. It is important, then, to explore exactly how the relationship between the ordinary and the extraordinary is to be understood, especially when it comes to the question of what is holy. That should give you a broad hint of where I am going in the title created for this talk: the holiness of the ordinary, the liturgy of the world.

It should not be difficult to guess why a woman should be eager to speak on such a subject. Since in the churches called catholic women were long barred from being the ordinary minister of any sacrament but matrimony, we were--until very recently--universally prevented from making the dispensation of the sacraments the matter of our lives. To us, in a disproportionate measure, has been allotted the realm of the ordinary, the daily, the mundane. Sometimes it has seemed that this also means that the work we do is secular, in need of something external to render it "holy." If it is the role of the sacraments to render things holy, it can seem that the salvific worth of everything done by those who are not priests is dependent on being blessed and transformed by the Church.

As director of a theological center for women, I hear the stories of women. One tells me that the priest counseled her and her husband to pray during intercourse in order to sanctify their love. Another weeps at the memory that she left her newborn and nursing baby for a week-end because the priest insisted that she must accompany her soon-to-be-ordained-permanent-deacon husband on a retreat and that to worry about the baby was to have her priorities wrong. Yet another is told to leave her children and go to daily Mass in order to sanctify the work she does at home.

These women sense there is something deeply wrong with the advice or the directives they are being given, but they lack a theological framework for defending what is to them an intuition and a feeling. I do not know if such attitudes obtain among those who give counsel in the Anglican church. You can enlighten me during the discussion period.

I do know that what is demanded now is a very different approach to understanding the sacraments in our lives. It was the liberation theologian, Juan Luis Segundo, who convinced me that the former approach to the sacraments had been, all too often, backwards.¹ That is, many of us thought that the reason the Church exists is to give us the sacraments. A corollary was that the sacraments grant catholic Christians an access to God that those outside the Church do not have. Because this way of thinking about the sacraments was combined with a more or less magical framework, in which there was no necessary connection between what was done in the sacraments and the expected outcome, these Christians could rarely give an account of their sacramental life that made sense to themselves, much less to those outside the Church. When we discuss the sacraments out of this kind of theological framework, their holiness is readily reduced to the sacredness of an object. What is revered, because holy, is the consecrated bread and wine, the holy water, the sacred oils. Ordinary bread and wine, water and oil, in this schema, are distinguished by being not holy, not sacred, not consecrated. Once that move is made, the chasm between the sacraments and ordinary life opens up to divide human reality into the sacred and the secular. By that I mean that people begin to think that the sacraments are holy and the stuff of daily life is not.

Segundo thinks that the fundamental flaw in this whole approach is that it assumes that the

Church exists to give us the sacraments. No, he argues over and over again: **the sacraments are for the Church so that the Church can be for the world.** This approach yields an entirely different way of understanding the relationship between the world and the Church, the Church and the sacraments, and the sacraments and daily life.

Though my primary concern today is to establish a more correct understanding of the relationship between the sacraments and the stuff of daily life, I must begin at the outermost reaches with the world and the Church to build a foundation for a renewed sacramental understanding of what we call the "ordinary."

The World and the Church

The first of the truths to be recaptured if we are to understand properly our sacramental life is that being a catholic Christian is a vocation. It is not the only way to love and serve God, but it is a special way, a way that brings with it obligations or responsibilities as well as glorious privileges. As we try to incorporate into our thinking the rich rediscoveries of contemporary theology, nothing is more important than this central insight. One does not have to be a Christian in order to be saved. God's power to bring human beings into union with the divine life exceeds all that we heretofore imagined, and the ways of others in the great religions of the world and in the broken body of the Church of Christ are not to be condemned as ineffective for salvation. But it is important to our salvation that we understand the vocation to which we have been called, for otherwise we will not be able to fulfill it.

Though there are many ways to express the particular vocation of the catholic Christian in the world, I will highlight two dimensions that I consider paramount: to be a catholic is to undertake the task of making present to the world a visible sign of human solidarity and of the goodness of all things created. It is a vocation, then, to sacramental communion.

There is much railing going on today about what has come to be termed the "institutional church." All too often, when people say "the Church" does this or that, they mean the hierarchy or the officially designated leaders and they are thinking of the church as a bureaucracy. Yet for catholic Christians, one of the oldest and most beloved terms for the church is "Holy Mother Church." If we are to understand the vocation of the catholic, we need to meditate a bit on that image.

Sally Cunneen, who has written a glorious work called *Mother Church, What the Experience of Women is Teaching Her*, illuminates the image with characteristic originality:

What might such mothering mean throughout the church today when so many of its "children" are in fact adults? Reexamining the image of Mother Church as it occurs in the formative years of the church can help us imagine an answer.

The image appeared in the writings of the church fathers in the first three centuries, where it symbolized, surprisingly, not a powerful authority but the action of all its members. In *The New Catholic Encyclopedia* Carl Delahaye says that the image of Mother Church conveyed "the strong sense that the fathers had of the entire church body as one communion of all the faithful in Christ." He goes on to assert that the image emphasizes "the responsibility of all

the faithful for all others in the life of the community, their effective and genuine participation, their authentic and living collaboration in the duties of the community in the midst of this world." Because the church is "the great WE of the faithful in Christ and in his Spirit," all together are enabled and required to serve in unison the handing on of this common faith and tradition.²

This is what I take to be the significance of Cunneen's observations: as long as we are children, calling the Church mother leads to an expectation that **she** take care of **us**. But for adult Christians, the image leads to the realization that **we are** the Church who is mother. We must take upon oneself the responsibility to foster the life of the whole, to commit ourselves to live life consciously **with** others. The individualism that isolates the self from all concern for others is radically opposed to this aspect of being Christian. As a great Jesuit mentor of mine used to say, "One Christian is no Christian."

But there is more to solidarity than not being alone. It requires a radical identification with the other, a sense of commonality in being. I was particularly struck by this image from a story that appeared once in the pages of *America* about a mother who had gone on a long-delayed pilgrimage to a faraway military cemetery to visit her son's grave:

The journey had been a great sacrifice to her, both financially and emotionally--a journey that hurt. And finally she stood on a lonely ridge and prayerfully surveyed the scene. With its row after row of crosses and stars it looked like a geometric garden of death waiting for the harvest. The harvest of resurrection perhaps. The stark simplicity of the markers made

the fields more tragic than Gothic spires or ornate monuments might have. For it frequently happens that the most powerful symbols of sorrow are the plainest.

"I don't think I'll look for his place alone," she said in a frail voice, one strangely filled with renewed hope. "They're so much alike this way I'll just think of them all as my sons." After all the years! After all the miles! After all the anticipation of this moment, she had surrendered her private sorrow for a greater sorrow. And perhaps there is no greater love than that--feeling another's pain as one's own. Adopting another's dead.³

There are, of course, other images of catholicity. But in a world torn by tribal hatred, ethnic wars, this one seems to me long overdue. If the human race is to have a future, there must be those willing to adopt another as one's own, living as well as dead. I am very aware that I am speaking these words in front of the AIDS crucifix that you have taken into your church, commemorating so many dead who are not your sons. The spirit remains the same: the spirit of the mother's heart moved by the vision of how alike we all are in our naked humanity.

This leads me to the second aspect of the vocation to be a catholic Christian: the witness to the goodness of all things created. As solidarity goes to what is common, this principle goes to what is particular--to the concrete, earthy, unrepeatable realities that make up human existence and that give life joy and juice, as the poet says. Here ethnicity leads, not to warfare, but to rich and endless variety. Think of the sights and smells of the churches you have known. Nothing created by God or human ingenuity is declared unworthy: art, dance, flowers, animals, ships, children, food, drink--all can be blessed and used to glorify God and enrich human life. This is the

sacramental principle. It is also the incarnational one. Theologian Sallie McFague puts it this way:

"Amazing revelations" come through the earth, not above it or in spite of it. An incarnational theology encourages us to dare to love nature--all the different bodies, both human and those of other life forms, on our earth--to find them valuable and wonderful in themselves, for themselves. This is what an incarnational view assures us: it is all right to love nature; in fact, we **should**. We pray to God through knowing and thereby being able to love all the wild and wonderful diversity of creatures. The prayer is simple: "Vive les differences. Long live the differences. Amen." ⁴

To be a catholic Christian, then, is to serve the world by knowing and loving the real differences among peoples and in creation. It is to serve God by striving to bring all of this into a unity in Christ so that the world may recognize the solidarity of created beings.

The Church and the Sacraments

If the Church is to be a sign to the world of the solidarity of humankind under God and the goodness of all things created as potential revelations of God, how then do the sacraments serve the Church? That is, in what sense are the sacraments "for" the Church so that the Church can be "for" the world? Let me speak first about the central sacrament, the one to which and from which all the others proceed. The citation comes from my own Roman Catholic tradition: the Constitution on the Liturgy of Vatican II . There the Eucharistic liturgy is proclaimed to be

the summit toward which the activity of the Church is directed; at the same time it is the

fount from which all the Church's power flows. For the aim and object of apostolic works is that all who are made children of God by faith and baptism should come together to praise God in the midst of [God's] Church, to take part in the sacrifice, and to eat the Lord's Supper.

The liturgy in its turn moves the faithful, filled with "the paschal sacraments," to be "one in holiness"; it prays that "they may hold fast in their lives to what they have grasped by their faith"; the renewal in the eucharist of the covenant between the Lord and his people draws the faithful into the compelling love of Christ and sets them on fire. From the liturgy, therefore, particularly the eucharist, grace is poured forth upon us as from a fountain; the liturgy is the source for achieving in the most effective way possible human sanctification and God's glorification, the end to which all the Church's other activities are directed (#10).

The purpose of the eucharistic liturgy, then, is to make us one body, "one in holiness," as the text says. Each sacrament is connected in some way to the sacrament of the eucharist that symbolizes and effects that oneness. Thus baptism welcomes the newborn or the newly convinced into the assembly of the faithful and into the life of Christ that is at once a death to the world and its ways. Confirmation seals that entry by eliciting free consent from the one who was baptized in infancy and affirming the readiness of the adult convert for a mature life in Christ. Penance and the sacrament of the sick aim to restore the one who is separated from the community by sin or by sickness to an active life in common again. Marriage and Holy Orders designate the parties who will take responsibility for the domestic church and for the ecclesial family. In this way these two

sacraments of responsibility insure that the community called church will go on into the future.

The purpose of the sacraments is to provide the visible signs of the invisible graces that the individuals believe they need in order to live as a catholic Christian in the Church: the grace to grow in the life of Christ, to commit to public action that is consonant with that life, to ask and give forgiveness for the ways in which they have offended against the community and against God, to believe that sickness and even death is not strong enough to cut one off from the eucharistic life. For those who accept roles of leadership in the communities that make up the life of the church, the whole church asks the grace to persevere in fidelity to the promises made to govern, teach, nurture and correct in the image of Christ.

One of the best and most memorable sermons I have ever heard was given on the feast of the Holy Family by a permanent deacon who was husband and father. He said that the goal of the Christian family is to bring all its members to the point of being brothers and sisters in Christ. This means, he reminded us, that the titles "Father" and "Mother," for the Christian, are titles meant to disappear as the young ones grow to maturity and the hierarchical structure once needed for growth is replaced by the holy communion of adult believers who relate to each other as brothers and sisters. Isn't this what Christ meant when he said, "Call no man Father but God alone"? Or when he insisted on calling his disciples friends and not servants. The goal of the Christian family and of the church is to make such relationships visible to the world so that all may understand the freedom and the dignity revealed to us in Christ.

One might say, then, that the family is to the Church what the Church is to the world. And

inasmuch as all the sacraments take their sustenance from the ordinary realities that make up family life, there is an intimate and essential connection between the extraordinary of the sacraments and the ordinary of daily life

The Sacraments and Daily Life

Now, this is the crucial step. How are we to understand the relationship between the sacraments and the daily activities that make up our ordinary lives? It cannot be that one set of activities is holy and the other not, for we know that the gospel record disallows such an approach. Rather, I think, the sacraments reveal the sacredness of what we term the ordinary, the holiness to be achieved by living according to the pattern of the sacraments, which is the pattern of the eucharist, in all the aspects of life

In an extraordinary book called *Ordinary Time, Cycles in Marriage, Faith and Renewal*, Nancy Mairs writes of just this experience.

The nourishing quality of the Eucharist, freely offered to anyone who's famished, has always been a central metaphor for me. I don't partake because I'm a good Catholic, holy and pious and sleek. I partake because I'm a bad Catholic, riddled by doubt and anxiety and anger: fainting from severe hypoglycemia of the soul. I need food. "O holy One," I pray as I savor the host, "as this bread nourished my body, so may your spirit nourish my soul. Grow strong within me, I pray, and let me live my life in your praise." God doesn't place conditions on the hungry. She feeds first and asks questions later. ...

"The Blood of Christ," I say to George [her husband], and he takes the pottery chalice and drinks. The Eucharist is inexhaustible, we feed on it week after week, and in configuring our relationship to reflect it, George and I nourish and sustain each other. Instead of eating each other up, we find we have enough, more than we'd ever dreamed, a surplus, a superabundance, plenty to squander in every direction and more where that came from, so much that we even lavish it on our poor foolish [dog] ... and the hummingbirds who, hovering around the empty feeder, peer through the back window and screech "juice! juice!" and one day--why not?--even worms, even daisies.⁵

Christ who invites us to feed on his body and blood teaches us to revere the ways in which we can feed each other and all the creatures of the world. Christ who lays hands on the sick and the lame and the blind and the dying and the dead teaches us the power of our human bodies to heal when we touch each other in love and in care. Christ who said to the sinner, "Go, sin no more" gives us the courage say, as Nancy Mairs does of the husband who betrayed her with another woman: "You may have hoped, in confessing...that we'd punish you by sending you away, but now you see that we won't do that. If you want to leave, you'll have to go on your own initiative. As far as we're concerned...you're one of us. We love you. We intend, if you will let us, to keep you."⁶

It is a truism in our theology that Christ acts in the sacraments. But it is no less true that those of us who have been baptized have **put on Christ** and that, when we act in love, carrying out our daily duties, Christ acts there as well. This is what it means to be a priestly people.

But there is more. To the extent that the sacraments become divorced from the realities of

what we are calling ordinary life, they will lose their power to inform and appear more and more detached, more and more magical to those who participate. Theologian and priest, James Burtchaell once wrote that no priest should celebrate the eucharist who has not cooked a meal and invited people to a table he has set. In this way he makes the point that I am striving for: there is an integral connection between the table and the altar, the warm circle of the family and the baptismal font, the mercurochrome and the bengay of aching muscles and cut flesh and the sacred sacramental oils. There is an essential connection between the flesh and blood gift of life that is parenting and the eucharist, between the asceticism of interpersonal forgiveness and the sacramental reconciliation of penance. Those who take responsibility for the domestic church and the ecclesial family must be schooled in both dimensions of catholic Christian life, for they inform and correct each other to keep us focused in the one vocation that is common to us all.

We need to cultivate the spirit of Benedict, who has a sentence in his Rule where he says that the most mundane household implements of the monastery should be treated with the same reverence as the vessels of the altar.

The trouble, of course, is with the ordinary. Poet Cynthia Ozick pegs it exactly:

The Extraordinary is easy. And the more extraordinary the Extraordinary is, the easier it is: "easy" in the sense that we can almost always recognize it....The Extraordinary does not let you shrug your shoulders and walk away.

But the ordinary is a much harder case. In the first place, by making itself so noticeable--it is around us all the time--the Ordinary has got itself in a bad fix with us: we

hardly ever notice it. The Ordinary, simply by **being** so ordinary, tends to make us ignorant or neglectful; when something does not insist on being noticed, when we aren't grabbed by the collar or struck on the skull by a presence or an event, we take for granted the very things that most deserve our gratitude.

And this is the chief vein and deepest point concerning the Ordinary: that it **does** deserve our gratitude. The Ordinary lets us live out our humanity; it doesn't scare us, it doesn't excite us, it doesn't distract us...Ordinariness can be defined as a breathing-space: the breathing-space between getting born and dying, perhaps, or else the breathing-space between rapture and rapture; or, more usually, the breathing-space between one disaster and the next. Ordinariness is sometimes the status quo, sometimes the slow, unseen movement of a subtle but ineluctable cycle, like a ride on the hour hand of the clock; in any case the Ordinary is above all **what is expected**.

And what is expected is not often thought of as a gift.⁷

An inadequate understanding of the relationship between the sacraments and daily life could lead one to conclude that the only way to full participation in the church is by way of ordination. It is to be hoped that the opening of ordination to women will result in a greater integration between the ordinary and the extraordinary, the sacraments and daily life. All of us must guard against the theology that would claim that the sacraments render holy human experiences that, left to themselves, remain secular and devoid of the mystery of God's presence and power. Such a theology demeans both the ordained priesthood and the common priesthood of the faithful, for it

imagines ritual and life as external to each other. For the Christian, that can never be so.

The Liturgy of the World

The spiritual significance of daily life can be lost to us without an attention focused by the rituals of the sacraments. So the continual unfolding of God's revelation in human history can be missed without the focus that is the eucharistic liturgy. As Katherine Platt says, "in ritual, attention is paid."⁸ It is not that the liturgical action is the only action in and through which we meet God--far from it. Rather, the liturgical actions of praise and thanksgiving, breaking and pouring out, offering and receiving, gathering and being sent out provide a paradigm through which we can come to understand history--the history of one's own life, of one's community, of one's world.

The 20th century German theologian Karl Rahner, God rest him, was the most eloquent spokesman for this liturgy of the world. By that phrase, he meant the human community's ongoing communion and cooperation with God in history. For Rahner, history is the site of that primary and original liturgy. "Worship," then, "is not primarily what happens when we gather together to celebrate the Eucharist; it is primarily what happens when we cooperate together with God in history. Liturgy is not originally the praise we give to God when we pray; it is what happens when we freely immerse ourselves in the abiding, absolute mystery during the great and small moments of life."⁹

Again, this theological approach asks us to relinquish any notion that what goes on in church is holy and the rest of life is not. All of life has been redeemed and can be the context in

which we encounter Holy Mystery. As Rahner writes, “When we say that we celebrate the death of the Lord until he returns, we are saying that we are giving space and time explicitly in our own life to the culmination of the history of the world liturgy which is present in the cross of Jesus. . . .Consequently what happens in worship of this kind is not something that does not occur or has not permanently occurred elsewhere in the world, but something that occurs always and everywhere or has occurred for all time and for everywhere in the world, and is explicitly celebrated, stated, and appropriated.”¹⁰

There will always be room in living liturgy, then, to make connections with events in the life of the community, with the human history unfolding in our time. Liturgical artists know this and make every effort to bring the fruits of the earth and the works of human hands into daily and weekly worship. Ecclesial and parish leaders who would increase active participation in such liturgies must show “that worship is the explicit celebration of the divine depth of ...ordinary life.”¹¹

Luis Espinal, SJ, wrote a prayer that captures the interaction between liturgy and life, the offering of self in the eucharistic action and that “losing oneself” that is ingredient to the Christian life:

We are candles that only have meaning if we are burning, for only then do we serve our purpose of being light. Free us from the cowardly prudence that makes us avoid sacrifice, and look only for security. Losing one’s life should not be accompanied by pompous or dramatic gestures. Life is to be given simply, without fanfare, like a waterfall, like a mother nursing her child, like the humble sweat of the sower of seed. Train us, Lord,

and send us out to do the impossible, because behind the impossible is your grace and your presence; we cannot fall into the abyss. The future is an enigma; our journey leads us through the fog; but we want to go on giving ourselves because you are waiting there in the night, in a thousand human eyes brimming over with tears.¹²

In these lines we hear a piety nourished by the images of gospel and life, a spirituality that aspires to the extraordinary by taking courage from the ordinary.

Summary

I have said that there is an internal relationship between the sacraments and ordinary life. The events of daily life root the sacraments in human experience; without this connection, they are incomprehensible. (Rahner comments that they become “strange ritualism,” little different from the sacrificial action of a Vedic priest) In turn, the words and actions of the church interpret the deep meaning of ordinary human life, enabling us to realize what God is doing in and among us. I have said that the church does not exist to give us the sacraments. Rather, the sacraments exist to make us church--a visible body of people whose lives show forth our belief in the holiness of all things, the presence of God in history, the availability of God’s grace in time and space. Being a Christian is not the only way to go to God. It is a vocation, a calling, freely responded to--and it carries responsibilities. I have said that liturgy is not the first nor the ultimate way that we encounter God. God has entered history, become one of us in Christ Jesus. The liturgy is the symbolic manifestation of what we believe about the world: as Rahner says, “salvation-history

takes place right in the midst of ordinary history.”¹³

The sacraments and the eucharistic liturgy are not given us so that we might escape from or devalue what is ordinary in human life. They are given as a help to break open for us the sacredness of the ordinary in all its splendid and expected variety. Celebrated as it should be, our worship gives us the grace to conduct ourselves in all of life in the manner of daughters and sons of God. It teaches us to glorify that God in our bodies, as St. Paul said. For that, after all, is the most sacred of the ordinary realities we are called to revere and to protect, the most perfect instrument for God's praise: the human being fully alive.

Mary Aquin O’Neill, RSM, Ph.D.
The Church of St. Agnes
Glen Huntley Victoria, Australia May 15, 1998
Copyright 1998
All Rights Reserved
Mount Saint Agnes Theological Center for Women
www.mountsaintagnes.org

¹ Juan Luis Segundo, S.J., *The Sacraments Today*. Orbis, 1974.

² Sally Cunneen, *Mother Church, What the Experience of Women is Teaching Her*. Paulist, 1991, p. 42.

³ *America* (January 21, 1989): 34-35.

⁴ *The Spire* (Spring/Summer, 1993): 12.

⁵ Nancy Mairs, *Ordinary Time, Cycles in Marriage, Faith, and Renewal*. Beacon Press, 1993, p. 89, 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁷ "The Riddle of the Ordinary," in Cynthia Ozick, *Art and Ardor*. Knopf, 1984.

⁸ Katherine Platt, "Places of Experience and the Experience of Place," in *The Longing for Home* edited by Leroy S. Rouner, (University of Notre Dame Press, 1996) p. 117.

⁹ Michael Skelley, S.J., *The Liturgy of the World: Karl Rahner's Theology of Worship*. (The Liturgical Press, 1991, 95.

¹⁰ "On the Theology of Worship," cited in Skelley, p. 104.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹² "The Living Spirit," *The Tablet* (4 April, 1998): 458/

¹³ "History of the World and Salvation-History," cited in Skelley, p. 88.