

‘Count your Blessings!’

The Interpretive Potential of Sacramental Theology for Everyday Ritualizations around Food

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Abstract

In this article, the authors explore the yield of a sacramental lens on extra-ecclesial ritualizations around food in contemporary Dutch ‘secularized’ culture. In an effort to explore the scope of sacramental theology beyond the liturgical ritual of the Eucharist/Holy Communion, they conclude that sacramental theology as a heuristic lens has a promising potential to reveal what is at stake when it comes to ordinary practices of food. Taking Louis-Marie Chauvet’s ground-breaking study *Symbol and Sacrament* as a point of departure for a sacramental frame, and using three examples from a recent Dutch TV series on counting blessings at dinner time, they seek to answer the question “What is the heuristic potential of a sacramental perspective on food-related ritualizations in everyday life?” The authors conclude that everyday ritualizations, in turn, constructively challenge ‘classic’ sacramental and liturgical theology. Thus, a sacramental lens on extra-ecclesial food-related ritualizations can enhance the understanding of the Eucharist/Holy Communion, as well as reveal what is at stake when it comes to ordinary (ritualized) practices of food.

Keywords

Louis-Marie Chauvet, sacramental theology, liturgical theology, ordinary practices of ritualizing around food, Dutch TV programme

Introduction

“Each day offers much to worry about, but may there also be reasons for gratitude?” In the fall of 2019, this question led the Dutch Evangelical Broadcasting Company (*Evangelische Omroeporganisatie*) to broadcast a new TV programme entitled ‘Count your blessings!’ (*Tel je zegeningen!*).¹ In 20 daily episodes of 15 minutes each, 25-year-old Christian TV-presenter Jesse Brandsen visited different people (mostly at home) around dinner time, trying to find out what made them feel blessed. The format

1) All episodes are available online. NPO Start. Accessed August 9, 2022, https://www.npostart.nl/tel-je-zegeningen/VPWON_1311588.

consisted of recurring questions posed by the presenter, which specifically concerned gratefulness and blessings, and the responses of his interviewees, which, interestingly, were seldom explicitly religiously informed. Following the programme, with each new episode, we as authors were increasingly struck by the fact that the interviewees repeatedly emphasized that what they put forward as a ‘blessing’ was something that had happened to them. Whilst preparing a meal, or during or after dinner, they said that this blessing was something they had received as a gift, often for nothing and often without having sought it out: a bar of chocolate brought to them by their neighbor, a shared meal with the family after a period of serious illness, and the opportunity to cook meals for refugees were all considered blessings. Even the presenter himself, as an uninvited dinner guest, was framed as a blessing.

This aspect of their meaning-making around food reminded us of notions in sacramental theology, particularly those elaborated in the liturgical-sacramental proposal of Louis-Marie Chauvet. The TV programme that delved into peoples’ ordinary lives thus triggered us to explore a broader use of his sacramental theology: could it also be used beyond the interpretation of the liturgical ritual of the Eucharist/Holy Communion to interpret everyday ritualizations around food, in order to find out what is at stake when it comes to food in daily life?

Behind this curiosity about the scope of sacramental theology and our academic interest in exploring it lies the apparent gap in meaning between the liturgical ritual of the Eucharist/Holy Communion and everyday ritualized practices of food. We assume that this is related to steady processes of secularization in the Netherlands, which, as research has shown, have led to “a reduced influence [of religious institutions] on the lives of their members, a decreased popularity of beliefs, the declined participation in rituals and diminishing knowledge of tradition and doctrines”, among other things.² This growing lack of knowledge about religion is not only observable among atheists and agnostics, but among the faithful as well. It may explain why – whereas in early Christianity the connection between daily food and meals and the Eucharist was strong and generally rather obvious³ – today, many people do not connect everyday food-related practices to the liturgical ritual of the Eucharist/Holy Communion. We consider this a loss, both for the general valuation of food in our society and the valuation of the liturgical ritual of the Eucharist/Holy Communion. On top of this, it is also a loss for theology, which apparently has little impact on ‘ordinary’ people and their sense-making of food practices (whether liturgical or ordinary).

Responding to these processes of secularization and the subsequent marginalization of theology, several Dutch theologians over the years have pleaded that theological language and notions be

2) Joep de Hart, Pepijn van Houwelingen and Willem Huijnk, *Religie in een pluriforme samenleving. Diversiteit en verandering in beeld. Deel 3: Buiten kerk en moskee*. (Den Haag: SCP, 2022), 140-142. When it comes to the significance of, at least, traditional Christian religion for Dutch society and the Dutch population as a whole, they see a trend of diminution.

3) Cf. for example the contributions in Soham al-Suadi and Peter-Ben Smit, *T&T Clark Handbook of Early Christian Meals in the Greco-Roman World* (London: T & T Clark, 2019).

rediscovered, brushed off, and hermeneutically (re-)interpreted, lest theology become irrelevant.⁴ According to Henk de Roest, the task of theology is

to take up a position between familiarity and strangeness and, in conversation with church, culture and academia, to get interrupted by and draw attention to the calling voice from the Scriptures. ... [Theology researches] where occurring practices of salvation, grace, justice, faithfulness, care, new life and conversion come from. ... Theology discloses such practices, because the semantic potential realized in these practices can lead to renewal of society and critically relates to practices in which individuals are objectified, excluded and humiliated.⁵

Our article is an effort to research the notions of ‘blessing’ and ‘gift’ and explore the heuristic potential and relevance of sacramental theology for the interpretation of ordinary, everyday food-related ritualizations.⁶ Although the notion of sacramentality (and sacramental theology for that matter) has regained the attention of theologians in the past three/four decades,⁷ it has been seldom employed for the interpretation of practices around food beyond the liturgical.⁸ We will specifically engage with the sacramental theology of the French theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet, predominantly with insights from his main work *Symbole et Sacrament*, because the notion of gift (and with that issues of givenness and activity and passivity) is central to his work.⁹ Breaking away from a (pre-modern)

4) Cf. for example Ruard Ganzevoort, *Spelen met heilig vuur. Waarom de theologie haar claim op de waarheid moet opgeven* (Utrecht: Ten Have, 2013).

5) Henk de Roest, *Met leren en wijsheid wordt de vrede gediend en blaast de god van de oorlog de aftocht. Over Gods nieuwe wereld en de toekomst van de technologie*. Lecture Dies natalis PThU 2022 (Amsterdam: Protestant Theological University, 2022), 31. English translation by the authors.

6) A TV programme based on a format of inviting ordinary people to count their blessings around dinner time may similarly be considered an effort to revitalise theological language and notions. This practice is not reserved for theologians. Cf. Mirella Klomp, *Playing on. Re-Staging the Passion after the Death of God* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 180, <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789004442948>.

7) A worthwhile introduction to the notion of sacramentality and its development can be found in Lizette Larson-Miller, *Sacramentality Renewed. Contemporary Conversations in Sacramental Theology* (Collegeville MN: Liturgical Press, 2016).

8) An interesting read in this respect is Kimberley Belcher, “Can a Mother Forget her Nursing Child? Flesh, Blessing, and the Eucharist” in *At the Heart of the Liturgy. Conversations with Nathan D. Mitchell’s ‘Amen Corners,’ 1991-2012*, ed. M. Johnson, T.P. O’Malley and D.S. Yocum (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2014), 1-12, where she explores God’s sacramental presence in this world, and, using the experience of breastfeeding her child as an analogy, indicates that the eucharistic experience must inform our experiences in daily life, and vice versa.

9) In this article we cite from the English version: Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament. A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, trans. Patrick Madigan and Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville MN: 1995). Italics in these citations are Chauvet’s. We studied this work together with prof. dr. Maarten Wisse and prof. dr. Marcel Barnard in the context of the post-academic course ‘Fundamental

onto-theological metaphysics with its causal interpretation of grace that continues to be mired in notions of ‘production’ and reduces grace as communicated in the Eucharist to an ‘object’ or ‘value’,¹⁰ he proposes an understanding of the sacrament as a ‘gift’ that shapes the relation between God and humans – a ‘gift’ that mediates grace, which is given, time and again. His work thus complements late-modern thinking around meaning-making in ritual, in which the notion of performance plays an important part. Moreover, Chauvet pays significant attention to the materiality and physicality of this gift and to the relationship between ‘religious’ ritual and ritual in ordinary: his proposal does not take an explicit Christian/theological point of departure, but an anthropologic one, which takes existential human experiences as a starting point. This legitimizes an exploration of the potential of a sacramental interpretation in line with Chauvet of everyday (not explicitly Christian) food-related ritualizations, such as ‘Count your blessings!’, in which the notion of ‘gift’ is equally important and often pertains to existential experiences.

The central question we will seek to answer in this article is “What is the heuristic potential of a sacramental perspective on food-related ritualizations in everyday life?” This question gives away that we consider ‘counting blessings’ to be a ritualization, taken, in line with ritual studies scholars Ronald Grimes and Catherine Bell, as a process.¹¹ To call what has happened to oneself a ‘blessing’ is an act of ascribing symbolic meaning to an event or occurrence. It is a performance of putting one’s finger on an event, pausing or freeze-framing it, and presenting or staging it as a blessing. People may perform such ritualizations in their lives without anyone noticing it, but the TV programme staged this ritualized practice of counting blessings around dinner time on national TV. This reinforced the ritual character of this act of symbolizing: the performance of counting blessings was formalized (in a live broadcast aired 20 weekdays in a row), was stylized (one address per day, in which the presenter asked interviewees about their gratefulness and what they considered a blessing) and was situated in place (mostly in people’s kitchens) and time (6PM, which is dinner time in the Netherlands).¹² “Ritual-

theology’, which took place in Our Lady Abbey in Oosterhout, NL, from February 25-March 1, 2019. Thanks to both of them for the insights we gained during this course. Other interlocutors would, of course, also have been possible; thinkers such as Jean-Luc Marion, for instance, in his *Étant donné. Essai d’une phénoménologie de la donation* (Paris: PUF, 1997); see, for an approach to the Eucharist informed by the phenomenology of the gift, also Kimberly Hope Belcher, *Eucharist and Receptive Ecumenism: From Thanksgiving to Communion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University, 2020), esp. 54-96.

10) Cf. the argumentation in Chauvet, *Symbol*, 7-44.

11) Cf. Paul Post, “Ritual Studies,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 1-23; 4, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.013.21>, where he classifies different approaches to ritual.

12) We here follow Post’s definition: “Ritual is a more or less repeatable sequence of action units which, take on a symbolic dimension through formalization, stylization, and their situation in place and time.” Post, “Ritual Studies”.

ization is the strategic manipulation of ‘context’ in the very act of reproducing it”, Bell writes.¹³ Such ‘orchestration’ is generally inherent to ritualizing, but the TV programme distinguished and privileged this counting of blessings in comparison to activities done ‘off camera’.¹⁴ Thus, this TV programme constructed a ritualized practice around dinner time that drew attention to the unusual: to (openly) being thankful for the ability to cook rather than taking it for granted, for example, or being grateful for dinner and table-fellows rather than being worried. In short, it reminded us, by presenting to us, that food is always more than just foodstuffs.

Following on this introduction, our contribution is structured as follows: a broad outline of the sacramental theology of Chauvet (1), followed by three examples taken from a few episodes of the TV programme ‘Count your blessings!’ (2), which will then be interpreted with a sacramental framework based on Chauvet (3). We conclude with a discussion of the heuristic potential of sacramental theology for the interpretation of wider and everyday food-related ritualizations in which people experience and describe things that happen to them as gifts (4).

1 Chauvet’s Sacramental Theology

Symbole et Sacrament can be counted as one of the ‘modern classics’ in sacramental theology. In order to clarify what his matter of concern is, Chauvet opens with the theological interpretation he wants to dispense with: a ‘causal’ interpretation of grace.¹⁵ Such an interpretation functions as a ‘productionist scheme of representation’, which means that sacraments according to this scheme ““cause grace,” they “work” or “produce” it, they “contain” it, they “add to” grace”.¹⁶ This runs counter to what grace actually is, according to Chauvet: what is required for grace in order to be grace is something other than thinking about it in terms of ‘causality’ and ‘productivity.’¹⁷ Chauvet presents this other approach using the word ‘manna’, finding a paradigmatic form of this approach in the Manna-tradition (Exodus 16). In our outline of Chauvet’s liturgical-theological proposal, we limit ourselves to presenting this manna-line, precisely because of its paradigmatic character.

Chauvet’s other approach to ‘grace’, which he develops against the background of broader cultural-anthropological considerations,¹⁸ is based on the sense of grace as a ‘gift-exchange’ that, in turn, is characteristic of the relationship between God with humans.¹⁹ Again, crucial here is the fact that

13) Catherine Bell, *Ritual Theory, Ritual Practice* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009²), 100.

14) Bell, *Ritual Theory*, 74.

15) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 7-44.

16) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 21.

17) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 44.

18) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 99-109.

19) Cf. Chauvet, *Symbol*, 108-109.

‘grace’ eludes categories such as ‘object’ or ‘value’:

It is “beyond the useful and the useless” (...). It belongs to what is “thrown into the bargain” and to super-abundance. Therefore, it is ‘*graciousness*.’ This concept designates here that which cannot, by definition, become the object of a *calculation*, of a price, of haggling.²⁰

Grace, however, does not only have an aspect of ‘graciousness’, but also of ‘gratuitousness’:

This is an equally precious word because it indicates that we are not at the origin of our own selves but that we receive ourselves from a gift that was there before us. A free gift, which can in no way be demanded and which we can in no way justify.²¹

For grace, and therefore for the sacramental as well, it is essential that Chauvet understands the gift as a gift that desires a return-gift:

[B]y the very structure of the exchange, the gratuitousness of the gift *carries the obligation of the return-gift of a response*. Therefore, theologically, grace requires not only this initial gratuitousness on which everything else depends but also the *graciousness of the whole circuit*, and especially of the return gift. This graciousness qualifies the return-gift as beyond-price, without calculation – in short, as a response of love. *Even the return-gift of our human reasons thus belongs to the theologically Christian concept of ‘grace’.*²²

The consequence of this argument is that Chauvet takes Christian existence as a continuous receiving and return-giving of grace in various forms. Of all these forms of grace, the sacraments are the most central. Two important points thus emerge from Chauvet’s argument: firstly, the relationship between God and the believing subject can only come about through mediation, and secondly, in this mediation, the believer is actively and productively involved by participating in this mediation communication.²³

In ‘*manna*’, Chauvet finds an expression of what grace is (“perhaps its [grace’s] most beautiful biblical expression”), because it demonstrates that “grace is of an entirely different order from that of value or empirical verifiability.”²⁴ (cf. Exodus 16,9-21). With this, grace has ultimately become a ‘non-thing’ and a ‘non-value’, impermeable to the logic of causality and producibility. Grace can only be approached via the path of the symbol, which, for Chauvet, is “the path of non-calculation and non-utility.”²⁵ As a result, the gift is intangible, whilst at the same time the gift-giver is hidden behind

20) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 108.

21) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 108.

22) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 108-109.

23) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 109.

24) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 45.

25) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 45.

the gift and is ‘absent’ (although in a very present manner: in the gift, in the dynamics of answering and return-giving).²⁶ To live as a Christian, according to Chauvet, is, in essence, to join this ‘gracious’ and ‘gratuitous’ relation of ‘gift-exchange’ by an absent and at the same time present God. It is to join a dynamic of giving, in which the gift remains impalpable and elusive for the logics of marketplace, calculation and competition. This joining occurs by responding to the gift with a return-gift, in turn. Christian existence is characterized by an ongoing mediation of the relationship, which is essentially an exchange of gifts (gift and gratefulness), in and by the material.

Based on the outline above, and on the basis of Chauvet’s theology of the Eucharist revolving around grace, we can sketch a framework with the following aspects: grace a) is a gift that is always materially mediated, b) needs to be received, and thus desires the return-gift of a response, which implies communication, c) is graciousness and gratuitousness, d) is elusive, incalculable and hard to grasp. Naturally, there is more to sacramental theology than these aspects, but these elements stand out in Chauvet’s blueprint of the same and suggest themselves as a potential point of departure for the analysis of other practices. This is especially inviting because, in Chauvet’s thinking, which builds on cultural anthropological and phenomenological insights that pertain to the world as such (and not just to the realm of religion), the entirety of social reality can be understood as a(n embodied) web of gift-exchanges, which makes the connection between cultic and everyday practices plausible, even natural. Thus, with what we have now constructed as a heuristic framework drawn from the sacramental theology of Chauvet, we will now introduce and analyze briefly a few episodes from the Dutch TV programme ‘Count your blessings!’.

2 Examples from the Dutch TV series ‘Count your blessings!’

Having watched the entire TV series, we had many episodes to choose from that could serve as examples. We here present a selection of three episodes with interviewees who live in different parts of the country and differ in age, socio-cultural-economic class and religious background.

2.1 Milking cows with farmer Arnold

Episode

In the northern province of Groningen, presenter Brandsen visits a young Christian dairy farmer who is about to milk his cows.²⁷ The conversation takes place in the dynamics of Dutch farmers’ protests

26) Somewhat paradoxically, this turns God’s absence into a form of presence, or at least into a way of relating to God.

27) ‘Count your blessings!’ Episode 18, 17 December 2019. NPO Start.

against the measures of the government to reduce CO₂-emissions. Hence Brandsen's introduction to the viewer at the very beginning of the episode: "Farmers are protesting, but is there gratitude as well?" The viewer meets a cheery farmer in his thirties ("Are you happy to be a farmer?" "Absolutely!"). Whilst Brandsen is given a pair of work boots and a pair of coveralls in order to assist, they walk to the new milking parlor for which the farmer appears to be very grateful:

This is a real blessing! We had a different milking shed (...) which was a bit too shallow. [Meanwhile a fenced is opened and the cows enter the parlor.] We now milk the cows from behind; previously we milked them from the side, and now it is safer. A cow does not as easily kick the claw piece, her udders are more visible for us.

Brandsen digs deeper and asks why the farmer calls this a 'blessing'. In his response, Arnold very clearly states that in his work as a farmer, many things are not obvious: the animals require his care and attention day after day, sometimes because they have problems with their udders or legs, or sometimes because a cow is pregnant and about to calve. "Those are all events that seem very normal, but they are actually very special. ... A cow does not tell you in the morning what she will need later that day!" This way of seeing things was handed down to him by his father, who is a farmer too. His father has always shared with his son that he was impressed, for example,

when strolling through the meadows in summertime. It is simply fantastic! ... As I got older, I began to pay more attention [to those things]. You have no influence: seasons follow each other, everything grows again, there is sun, there is rain, and it just goes on...! My dad would say: "Look at the sun!" or: "What a harvest!" Such are the small things that make you realize that you work very close to creation. That is what's beautiful about this business.

Arnold considers everything part of God's creation, and understands himself a child of God. Therefore, he brings his whole farm and work before God in prayer. He mentions that sometimes during the milking a cow defecates and makes a mess in the milk stand and even poops over the farmer, and that, admitting that he is a passionate type of person, he then prays for self-protection and self-control: "She can't help it, after all."

Asked for the blessing of this day, Arnold tells Brandsen about a colleague who had borrowed a machine a while ago and stopped by to bring him a bottle of wine as a present to thank him: "Those are the finer things in life..."

Analysis

In this interview, it becomes immediately clear that blessings are material: they are not simply an idea. There is a concrete milking parlor which is deeper than the former one; the direction in which the cows are milked has changed; milking has become physically safer for animals and farmer alike; the process

of the agricultural practice runs more smoothly, which, although Arnold does not explicitly mention it, may also lead to higher profits. There is sun and rain; there are meadows and cows who are full of surprises: all very material blessings. All these things just occur to the farmer: “You have no influence.” The gift remains impalpable and elusive for the logics of marketplace, calculation and competition.

The blessing of a colleague who brings a gift because he has borrowed a machine shows that a gift necessitates a return-gift. This blessing is directly related to the fact that a gift is graciousness and gratuitousness. This bottle of wine was not the result of calculation: farmer Arnold had lent his machine rather than rented it out, so he had not expected a present from his colleague. The colleague, in turn, wanted to be gracious: he had borrowed a machine, which was a gratuitous gift from farmer Arnold, and now wished to express his gratitude for this gift. Arnold, in turn, calls this an example of ‘the finer things in life’ and interprets this expression of gratitude as a blessing. This gift-exchange lays bare how Arnold and his colleague have an ongoing communicative relationship.

For Arnold, God is the creator of all things and seems to be the giver of blessings, hidden behind the gift. The colleague who offers a bottle of wine is a giver too, even if he is not defined as a blessing (though the gift of the wine is). Yet, the sentence ‘those are the finer things in life’ suggests that the colleague may not be entirely or solely held responsible for this gift.

2.2 Cooking with the formerly homeless Erika

Episode

In the city of Utrecht, Brandsen visits Erika, a woman in her early forties, in a tiny apartment filled with trinkets, ornaments and holy statuettes.²⁸ After a divorce, twelve years earlier, she was evicted from her house and lived on the streets for four years. During this time, she was deprived of maternal authority and not allowed to see her children. Erika shows Brandsen her living room and, even before he has asked her what she considers a blessing, states that she is grateful to have this roof over her head. After some chatting, in which she explains that blessings abound in her current life, Erika takes Brandsen to the kitchen to cook simmered vegetables with meat. While cooking together, she tells him that – besides her volunteer work at a homeless shelter and with refugees – she is a volunteer at *Socialrun* (a walking and cycling event for teams of people with and without psychiatric vulnerability) where she cooks for walkers and cyclists. The ability to do so, she considers a blessing, because:

... during the years I lived on the streets, I always felt blessed to have people coming to me (...) when they saw me on a bench or sitting at the bus stop. They then addressed me and we talked about my situation and they asked me whether I had enough food and drink. And this was the way I got my food. I have never begged, because I feel ashamed to do so.

28) ‘Count your blessings!’ Episode 6, 26 November 2019. NPO Start.

When mentioning that whilst living on the streets she often found hope in the Bible, Erika defines the things that happened to her as tribulations: many people have the idea that God is punishing them, according to Erika, but whatever difficulties she may have had were chances for her to move forward in life. When Brandsen asks what she is grateful for today, she, while stirring the vegetables and looking into the pot, admits with a soft voice to being grateful for this very meal. “I chase special offers in shops, because sometimes, I just cannot get by. And I always encounter generous givers who say: take what you want.”

Analysis

In Erika’s story, the blessings that occur to her take the material forms of a roof over her head that she has received, of food that she has received when in need, of conversations with people in the past and present. She repeatedly emphasizes that she has not *asked* for food: what she receives (people’s attention and care, resulting in food) has come to her as an expression of graciousness, and has come gratuitously, rather than as a result of piety evoked by a request or even lament. The desired return-gift is her gratefulness and her feelings of being blessed, along with the opportunity to become a giver of food (as a volunteer cook) herself, which she considers something special. (This raises the question of whether gift-givers and receivers make up a wider network of relationships, not only of God and a person, but also of God, a person and other human beings.)

Erika never reveals who she thinks is responsible for the gift-giving. She is grateful, but does not explicitly mention (and nor does Brandsen ask her) to whom: Erika does not say “I feel blessed by those/by God who gave me food” (she rather formulates it as “I always had the blessing of...”). The gift giver is absent and hard to grasp. She does, however, mention God as the giver of tribulations that make her move forward in life. Apparently, gifts are not limited to positive or affirming experiences.

2.3 Celebrating Thanksgiving Day in the Netherlands

Episode

“What is Thanksgiving Day mostly about: giving thanks, or eating?”²⁹ With this question, Brandsen rings Liesbeth’s doorbell on the fourth Thursday of 2019. “For me, it is not so much about eating”, she responds, taken by surprise and inviting him in. Entering the living room, she corrects her initial response and says: “Both are, of course, connected. The idea of Thanksgiving Day is that you eat together with people, whether family, friends or others. So, it is about togetherness and about dwelling on the things one can be thankful for in life.” Liesbeth has been celebrating this typically American ritual since she moved to the USA from the Netherlands in 1977 at the age of 23 for a job at the Dutch embassy in Washington. A newcomer in DC, without an apartment, friends or relatives, she walked into a church one Sunday morning, where she was warmly welcomed for coffee after the service. An

29) ‘Count your blessings!’ Episode 8, 28 November 2019. NPO Start.

older couple took care of her. A few weeks later Liesbeth received a phone call at work: the couple wanted to invite her over to celebrate Thanksgiving Day. Her colleagues in the office were surprised: “Have you been invited over for Thanksgiving? Fantastic! You should absolutely accept the invitation!” She did, and celebrated together with the couple, their adult children and their families, and with a home-cooked meal comprising such classics as turkey, pumpkin pie and cranberry sauce – an unforgettable experience.

Brandsen had hoped to sit down at Liesbeth’s table for a Thanksgiving dinner this evening, but she appears to have postponed the celebration. However, she invites him to help her cook cranberries in the kitchen instead. Unable to hide his slight disappointment, she then offers him a jar of homemade cranberry sauce that is already there: “You know what? You may take this home if you want.” “Oh! Ohhh! This is the end product of what we will be cooking?” he exclaims with surprise. Having turned to the stove, she then tells Brandsen why she appreciates the Thanksgiving ritual:

The idea is that one day a year – in fact, one should do it more often, but by all means on *this day* – one dwells on the question ‘what do I have’? Look, we are often inclined to focus on the things we do not have, but one can also think of what one has, which is actually quite a lot! ... What I liked about that American family: the grandchildren, aged 5, 6, 8... were also invited to say and even, with a little help, to talk about how they thought things were going, what they were happy with in their lives, such as friends, a teacher in school...

Being asked about the addressee of her own gratitude, Liesbeth indicates that it is not directed to ‘God’ (she was raised Roman-Catholic, but relates how, over time, she lost the image of God as a father or mother, as well as her connection with religion more generally), but then stumbles – “it is hard to say” – and suggests that it is directed to “Life”.

The Thanksgiving encounter in the USA made an indelible impression on her. Ever since she experienced what it was like to enter a country as a stranger (although she mastered the language, had a job and was familiar with the culture), she has often contemplated how hard it is for people to enter a country where they don’t speak the language and don’t know what is going on, to be totally dependent on others. She is open to such people and talks about how in her area they have just held a huge drive for relief supplies for a refugee camp in Greece. Then, Brandsen remarks that those refugees in Greece must be thankful to receive so much help, to which Liesbeth decidedly responds: “Well, gratitude is the one thing they mustn’t have. If only it helps!”

The episode concludes with Brandsen opening the jar of cranberry compote that Liesbeth gave him, tasting a spoon full of it and exclaiming “Hmm! And this is something *I* am grateful for!”

Analysis

Whereas Brandsen seems to hold a dichotomous view on the relation between ‘the spiritual’ and ‘the material’, here (giving thanks or eating) as well as in other episodes, Liesbeth has a profound under-

standing of the tight connection between the two: her experience of the invitation to the Thanksgiving dinner from the elderly couple she had met in church shows that this was a materially mediated gift. They took care of her, inviting her to their home, sharing their food, their company, their thanksgiving. She subtly shows this connection to Brandsen by giving him a jar of cranberry sauce. Both gifts were acts of graciousness and gratuitousness that could have been left undone and were responded to with return-gifts. The couple could have celebrated with their children and grandchildren (yet chose to invite this 23-year-old lonely stranger too) and Liesbeth responded by gratefully accepting the invitation. And Liesbeth simply could have left Brandsen feeling disappointed that he would not see the food of (or even share in) the Thanksgiving dinner that night, but instead gave him a jar of sauce to take home, to which he responded with the return-gift of surprise, a spoon full of sauce, and the explicit expression of his thankfulness for this gift.

The gratuitous aspect of gift-giving is emphatically emphasized by Liesbeth when she speaks about the collection of relief supplies for refugees in Greece. In a friendly manner, she actually corrects Brandsen's claim that the refugees "must be grateful for this": "Gratitude is the one thing they mustn't have." Indeed, even the return-gift (of gratitude) is a gift: it is not sought after by the givers of aid, not calculated, it escapes the logic of the marketplace. She rejects the suggestion that receivers must be grateful because of the gifts they have received: the gift is given to support and not in any way meant to cause, let alone produce, thankfulness. "If only it helps!"

Lastly, having experienced what it is like to be a stranger in a foreign country, and being grateful for the gift of the Thanksgiving dinner given to her in that situation, Liesbeth is inspired to give gifts to others in similar situations, in this case to refugees who have come ashore in Greece. This may be seen as an extension of the return-gift of being invited to the Thanksgiving dinner: an indirect return-gift, not to the elderly couple who had invited her, but to others, at a later stage and in a different place.

3 The sacramental frame to interpret 'Count your blessings!'

In this section, we use the sacramental framework based on Chauvet's theology to explore the heuristic potential of sacramental theology for a further interpretation of everyday food-related ritualizations.

3.1 Materially mediated gift

The three episodes show that the blessings Arnold, Erika and Liesbeth are grateful for all have a material character (including when they are social and therefore physical). Whether relating to the new milking parlor that enables a safer and more comfortable milking of cows, the harvest from the field, a bottle of wine, or to food received whilst living on the streets or having a small budget, or to a Thanks-

giving dinner and the gift of a jar of cranberry sauce, the ‘spiritual’ word ‘blessing’ is repeatedly mentioned as a description of embodied practices. This is closely related to another aspect: namely, that the gratitude people speak about mostly takes a material form. The gratitude Brandsen searches for is a concept, but when interviewees are asked what their gratitude entails, they almost always mention practical things: lending a machine to a fellow-farmer, cooking as a volunteer for participants in a social event. Gratitude is an embodied practice, one that has an important sense-making role: whenever asked about blessings, existential experiences are cited that contribute to leading a meaningful life. Material and social practices are virtually always bound up with meaning making (often in relation to the transcendent or the ‘elusive’, see below).

This materiality is natural for Chauvet, but, apparently, less so for Brandsen. However, since Chauvet emphatically departs from the gift-exchange as a basis for human existence, and as fundamental experience of grace, and since Liesbeth does not follow Brandsen’s dichotomous frame (and nor do several interviewees in other episodes), a definition of religion that pits the material and the immaterial against each other turns out rather unfruitful if one tries to understand how blessings ‘work’. Considering the importance of the material in the process of giving, and thankfulness-as-gift and the sense-making character of it, it seems reasonable to speak, in this context and from the perspective of Chauvet’s paradigm, of a form of sacramentality.

3.2 Giving and receiving: a communicative relationship

Stimulated by the format of the TV programme that searches for ‘blessings’ and by its presenter explicitly asking about gratitude, the interviewees show us that the notion of ‘receiving’ is a central theme. Particularly in examples 2 and 3, Erika and Liesbeth, in response to Brandsen’s questions on gratitude/blessings, mention situations in which they were either vulnerable or in need (whether mentally, physically, socially and/or economically) and received something, whether it was attention, or care, whether someone had enough food or a hospitable invitation to dinner for a lonely stranger in a foreign country. Support in such situations is explicitly identified as a blessing or a gift and related to thankfulness. Receiving and the gift of food are inherently connected with human precarity and the experience and insight that human existence is a dependent and relational existence: the gift of food always connects a person with others, no matter how fleetingly. These may be the gift-givers, but may also, as the examples make clear, extend to those who become receivers of the return-gifts at a later stage and in a different context. Erika in particular demonstrates this: she feels blessed (return-gift, gratitude) to have received food whenever in need and therefore cooks as a volunteer herself (return-gift, meals for others).

Although Chauvet does not elaborate much on this, another aspect worth mentioning is the appreciation of the gift.³⁰ As Chauvet’s proposal regards a rethinking of the sacraments, the gift – be-

30) Chauvet pays some attention to the ethical dimension of the sacramental gifts of bread and wine (e.g.,

cause it is God communicating grace to human beings – is something that is generally received neutrally/positively. In the TV series, Brandsen, in his search for blessings, almost exclusively asks about positive experiences. However, Arnold in example 1 (when a cow makes a mess in the milk stand and, in the new milking parlor, poops over the farmer) and Erika in example 2 (becoming homeless and losing contact with her children) also identify difficult or negative experiences as blessings and reasons for gratitude. Interpreting such ‘disruptive’ experiences as blessing is also part of receiving, and leads to underexposed/underappreciated dimensions of life being highlighted in such a way that an experience of being blessed and of gratitude arises. ‘Receiving’ in such cases becomes an even more active/creative process: existence becomes sacramental when the elements are interpreted as such. Such creative and interpretive moments receive less attention in Chauvet’s theology.

3.3 Graciousness and gratuitousness

That a blessing is something that happens to a person, becomes very obvious in the TV series and is understandable in light of the gratuitous character of the gift Chauvet points to. The gift need not be there, yet it is there, and it is crucial, as farmer Arnold in example 1 makes clear: a bottle of wine makes up part of “the finer things in life”. Chauvet’s notion of the ‘gratuitousness’ of the gift is one way to understand the experiences of Arnold, Erika and Liesbeth: blessings occur, without compelling reasons, and regularly as a result of the graciousness of the other.

The gift necessitates a response, namely the return-gift of thankfulness, as we have seen above. For Chauvet, the response is an essential dimension of how the gift works. This response can take the form of naming the reason for gratitude or embodying this gratitude by ‘giving beyond’ (cf. Erika’s cooking for volunteers, Liesbeth’s collection of relief supplies), which is, in turn, also material. However, Brandsen’s interviewees emphasize that the receivers of gifts remain free in their responses. Chauvet helps to understand why: the gift is by definition not an instrument for the giver. Erika and Liesbeth show reluctance to expect gratitude from gift-receivers; they denounce the very suggestion that their gift-giving is something ‘special’ requiring gratitude. The effect of this ‘disenchantment’ of ‘special behavior’ is threefold: it positions the benefactor as modest, removes the element of dependence from the relationship, and sets a normative standard for this gracious behavior (as it is ‘normal’, everyone should be involved in, in Chauvet’s language, ‘gracious’ relations of gift-exchange).

3.4 Elusive, incalculable and hard to grasp

At some point in the interviews, Brandsen asks his interviewees about the addressee of their thankfulness. Some are clear in their answers and speak about their faith (“God, who has created all this”). But even with an inexplicit or vague addressee, the dynamics of being vulnerable, receiving, being thankful and *enacting* gratitude remain intact and closely connected to the materiality (of food, but

unethically produced bread and wine for the Eucharist he calls ‘de-creation’, cf. Chauvet, *Symbol*, 358).

also more broadly). A tension with authoritative forms of theology or the belief of the Christian church may explicitly come to the fore here, such as the personal image of God or the institutionalized church. Thus, it turns out that neither a clear (transcendent) sender of gifts nor a grateful recipient of these gifts is required in order for people to be able to interpret the dynamics of gift and gratitude. Brandsen's general wording 'God' sometimes led to a broadening of his suggestion ("one can also say... thankful to Life"), but it is striking is that Christian Erika (and other Christian interviewees in other episodes) also responded with an (apophatic) stammering: a faltering search for words and images of God.³¹ Whether the return-gift of gratitude is directed to God or has a more abstract address, in all conversations a gift is considered something mysterious or marvelous.

Here, we recognize Chauvet's claim that the giver is 'absently present' in the gift-exchange and constantly moves behind the gift that represents and mediates the giver. For Chauvet, this absent presence is crucial to understanding godly presence in this world. It leads to an image of God that is highly transcendent, unreachable, indescribable and elusive (yet for that reason paradoxically not absent; both immanence and transcendence are modes of presence, not absence). This, too, is a consequence of the emphasis on grace as a 'gift': both gift and receiver remain free and both literally and figuratively hard to grasp. The search for words can explain the 'ungraspability' of both the gift and giver (as receiver of the return-gift), which may then lead to other practices of giving food or time (Erika as a volunteer cook; Liesbeth organizing a collection of relief supplies) at a later stage and in a different context in which others are involved.

4 Conclusion and discussion

We have used a sacramental frame based on Louis-Marie Chauvet's theology to investigate the ritualizations of identifying and framing food-related events as 'blessings' (and, on a meta-level, into the ritualization in the form of a TV programme that broadcasts a search for such ritualizations). Our central question "What is the heuristic potential of a sacramental perspective on food-related ritualizations in everyday life?" can be answered as follows.

The heuristic potential of this sacramental perspective lies, first of all, in its ability to a) clarify that the blessings identified in the food-related ritualizations are gifts and b) offer a deeper understanding of how these blessings come about. Secondly, if, with Chauvet, the gift is the heart of the relation (between God and human beings), then this heart of the Christian tradition can be recognized in sense-making food-related ritualizations. A sacramental perspective then enables a further characterization of the relationship between gratitude and the gifts leading to gratitude: namely, as grace.³²

31) This may also be explained as the linguistic and conceptual unease of 'secularized inhabitants of the Netherlands'; however, the responses of those who self-identify as Christian also demonstrate show that nothing is self-evident.

32) The character of this relation does not require explicit religious faith: experiences of gift-giving appear

The heuristic potential of a sacramental perspective thus lies in its ability to understand the daily food-related ritualizations of identifying blessings as ‘living from grace’.³³ To be sure, this does not entail collapsing everyday practices into the sphere of the cultic or liturgical, which remains distinctive, as does the sphere of everyday practices; yet, the boundary between the two does become more porous and insights pertaining to the one can also be of use to elucidate the other.

In line with how De Roest understands the task of theology, we have researched where occurring practices of grace come from; our contribution elucidates the vital role that food plays in grace. Such practices of grace show that gratitude is ‘a semantic potential that is realized’ in the practices of identifying blessings, both for people in their (private) daily lives and, in this case, also on national TV.³⁴ They may communicate how God may mediate grace in daily life, how God may be ‘absently present’ in ritualizations around food that are not necessarily liturgical, and how the Eucharist/Holy Communion and everyday food practices are related. They may also make us attentive to food-related practices in which ‘individuals are objectified, excluded and humiliated’.³⁵ Think, for example, of food companies that donate cheap and unhealthy food products close to or even beyond the expiry date to food banks.³⁶ Food, in general, but especially in gift-giving, is always more than food; it is relation, communication. It may be grace and blessing, but also non-grace and curse.

These two answers lead to a third answer to the central question on a different level, that of the academic discipline of theology: as a sacramental perspective has appeared fruitful for the interpretation of everyday food-related ritualizations, it bears the potential to open up new research fields in both liturgical and sacramental theology. Our article has made clear that the scope of sacramental theology extends beyond the ecclesial-sacramental. This may be no surprise, considering that Chauvet’s anthropological starting point has a broader basis and scope than the ecclesial alone. Yet, the use of such a perspective for the interpretation of food-related ritualizations in (an increasingly secular) society in particular challenges liturgical and sacramental theologians to be more ambitious in defining their research fields. Liturgical theology is a form of public theology, especially because a liturgical paradigm can interpret everyday life in a way that illuminates this life. Our use of Chauvet’s theology has shown how in such an effort it is helpful to use notions that are common and play a full part in both everyday language and (explicit) religious language, as this supports bridge-building between those fields.

to be existential and sense-making experiences.

33) This is a perspective we offer as authors and theologians, of course without suggesting that everyone who identifies experiences of gift-exchange as blessings as model-Christians.

34) De Roest, *Met leren*, 31.

35) This is especially relevant in the context of what may be called the ‘global food crisis’.

36) Cf. Hilje van der Horst, Stefano Pascucci, Wilma Bol, “The “dark side” of food banks? Exploring emotional responses of food bank receivers in the Netherlands”, *British Food Journal* 116/9 (2014): 1506-1520, <https://doi.org/10.1108/BFJ-02-2014-0081>.

Finally, having answered the central question, we will discuss a few challenging questions to Chauvet's sacramental theology, based on our three examples. The rationale for doing so is that the food practices, with their dimensions of giving and receiving, discussed here can all shed light on dimensions of the ritual meal at large, of which the Eucharist is another example. Reversing the perspective, then, the following questions may be asked to the sacramental theological paradigm that was used here from the vantage point of the everyday meal practices that were analyzed earlier on. As was the case when viewing everyday practices from the vantage point of sacramental theology, to challenge the latter from the point of the former is not necessarily to equate the two. Nor does it involve collapsing the distinction between them – the term 'challenging' indicates both connection and distance. With these caveats, the following questions can be formulated to (Chauvet's) sacramental theology.

Is there a role for human vulnerability in Chauvet's sacramental theology?

In the episodes we summarized and discussed, the relationship between gift and vulnerability became very clear. In a way, this may be seen as a 'correction' of the theology of Chauvet, in whose proposal the vulnerability of the receiver of the gift is much less central. On a fundamental level, Chauvet does link the notion of receiving to human fragility, because in the act of receiving human beings open (even must open) themselves and in giving eventually give themselves (a gift represents the giver). Yet, this fragility is almost a purely theoretical theological vulnerability and is in any case much less concrete than the vulnerability experienced by people in their needs.

Does Chauvet's sacramental theology allow for negative occurrences to be described as 'grace' or 'gift'?

We have shown that in specific gift-exchanges, experiences that others would classify as 'disturbing' or 'negative' may also be seen as gifts or blessings in the form of tribulations. Formulated the other way around: what comes as a gift does not necessarily have to be a positive or affirmative experience. Calling this a 'gift' is an active and creative 'appropriation' that gives symbolic meaning to what as an event is still diffuse.³⁷ To call 'becoming homeless' a gift is a courageous act that recognizes, behind this undesired gift, a giver with whom one has a relationship and who even relates positively to a person. Chauvet devotes some attention to the ethical aspect of the gift: bread cannot be Eucharist "when, taken away by an unjust economic system from the poor who have produced it".³⁸ He is critical of any abuse of God's creation by the privileged at the cost of the unprivileged – and rightfully so. But then the question (which, based on our example, is not so fanciful) arises: what if the receiver of this bread is one of the poor who produced it and, being a participant in the Eucharist, longs for the

37) Appropriation is here used as a neutral term (from Latin: *ad + proprius*), denoting the process of 'making your own'.

38) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 358.

communion with Christ? Does he/she “eat one’s own condemnation” as Chauvet states?³⁹ This is an important issue that requires further reflection, both for our understanding of the eucharistic bread as well as any unjust daily practices of food that we engage in today.

Is it possible to connect Chauvet’s proposal with concrete and even ‘postponed’ return-gifts?

In his book Chauvet frequently points to the mediation of grace as an ongoing communicative process.⁴⁰ In his focusing on this process of gift-giving and return-giving, he does not designate which concrete return-gifts are return-gifts of which concrete gift. This is understandable, as it may jeopardize the idea of the gratuitousness of the gift. Yet, it also makes the sacrament of the Eucharist – his topic – a theological phenomenon that is somewhat difficult to relate to specific practices of the Eucharist, the concrete materiality of bread and the wine. Our three examples, however, show that it may be worthwhile to talk about the specifics of gifts and return-gifts: the milk produced by *this* particular cow with her sprained left ankle, *this* meadow situated here, that gave *this* particular quantity of harvest (if the particularity of hectares does not matter, what else does?), *this* pack of sausages that *this* person with a limited budget is allowed to take home for free, being invited to *this* Thanksgiving dinner with *this* elderly couple and their loved ones. Mentioning the concrete, materially mediated grace may even be truly right and just (in the sense that it enables to honor more emphatically the specific gift as well as the giver). Furthermore, this would open up the possibility to identify return-gifts given at a later stage or to receivers of gratitude who were not the initial gift-givers but are included in the process of giving and receiving grace nonetheless, as part of the gift-exchange. Diaconal practices of food aid in times of crisis, which are a return-gift that mediates the gratitude of diaconal workers or volunteers for the gift of bread and wine in a particular eucharistic practice, may serve as an example here.⁴¹ The possibility to see later (or even postponed) return-gifts as part of eucharistic practices in their particularity ties such liturgical and non-liturgical ritualizations more tightly together. This could, in line with our third answer above, be promising for further research in a widened research field.

39) Chauvet, *Symbol*, 358.

40) “Grace requires not only this initial gratuitousness on which everything else depends but also the *graciousness of the whole circuit*, and especially of the return gift”, Chauvet, 108-109. Elsewhere, he calls the symbolic mediation ‘a task never fully achieved’; (consenting to the presence of the absence of God is the task of becoming-Christian, cf. 187-188). Christian existence is an ongoing receiving and return-giving grace, in various forms.

41) Cf., for example, Kirsten van der Ham e.a., *Food in Times of Crisis. A Practical Theological Study on Emergency Relief Provided by Churches in Amsterdam Zuidoost during the Covid-19 Pandemic.*, PThU Research Report (Amsterdam: Protestant Theological University, 2021).

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