

Other Voices, Other Rooms

Liturgical Prayer in Postmodern Cultures

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My task in this paper is to assess the significance of liturgical action within the context of postmodern thought. The text is divided into two parts. Part One, entitled 'Calling God Names', deals with the postmodern problematic of liturgical prayer by concentrating on that problem's two primary sources – the first, *scriptural*, and the second, *philosophical*. Part Two, entitled 'The Structure of Saying "Yes"', explores the language of liturgy as a fundamental *language of faith*.

1. Calling God Names; Scriptural and Philosophical Sources of the Problematic of Liturgical Language

1.1. The Scriptural Source

In his essay entitled 'The Subject of Prayer: Unwilling Words in the Postmodern Access to God', British scholar Laurence Paul Hemming makes a perceptive comment about postmodern experiences of public prayer: 'We are no longer *constituted* liturgically in prayer,' he writes:¹

we constitute for ourselves the liturgy that best expresses our interior psychic life. Liturgy becomes style. It does not produce me, I produce it. In consequence, when I say that it 'feels right' I am saying that it fits an interior disposition I already have – if I think about it at all.

At the risk of losing Hemming's nuance, one may paraphrase his point in an aphorism: The liturgy no longer makes *us*; *we* make the liturgy. Liturgy is no longer perceived as an event in which God summons and 'calls us by name'; it has become a self-assertive activity in which *we* name God.

Calling God names is not, of course, exactly the same thing as *naming* God. Postmodern theologians like Jean-Luc Marion remind us that 'The Name [God] does not name God as an essence; it designates what passes beyond every name. The Name designates what one does *not* name and says that *one does*

¹ L.P. HEMMING: 'The Subject of Prayer: Unwilling Words in the Postmodern Access to God', in G. WARD (ed.): *The Blackwell Companion to Postmodern Theology* (Malden 2001) 444-457: 446 (emphasis added).

not name it.² Our willingness to *call God names* while refusing to *name God* results in a pragmatic theology of absence which is not, however, a theology of God's *non-presence*. It is, instead, a theology whose very name-calling reveals that we *cannot* name, a theology that wants to shield God from *presence*, i.e., from confinement *to* or containment *within* the causal categories of traditional metaphysics and 'onto-theology'. For as Marion and other postmodern theologians would argue, God is utterly beyond signification, and hence surpasses all categories of 'presence' or 'absence'.

The unnamability of God is, of course, a major preoccupation of postmodern theology. Nor is this preoccupation purely speculative; it derives, in part, from the biblical record of revelation itself. Irenaeus of Lyons († ca. 200 C.E.) said that Christ's coming 'brought us all possible newness by bringing us himself. For Christ was announced in advance, and what was announced was precisely this: that Newness in person would come to renew and quicken humankind'.³ Commenting on this text, Jean-Luc Marion concludes that⁴

Easter innovates, and does so radically. (...) The innovation has a name – Christ – and a function – to render man new (...) Since the Resurrection of Christ, (...) nothing will be as it was before. Since the Resurrection of Christ, we thus must re-learn everything, like children (or rather, (...) like an old person, overcome by newness). (...) We are thrown forward into a world too new for us.

We might expect that Christ's radical *newness* would result in a more immediate and palpable presence of God within the world – a presence that would not only let us name God, but would also open us to know and experience God's incomprehensible nearness in the risen body of Jesus. We are profoundly perplexed, therefore, to discover that in the Christian scriptures, Easter produces just the opposite effect: not a new and more certain presence, but a heightened (and daunting) awareness of *absence*. Thus, the Risen One's first command to Mary Magdalen is 'Back off! Don't touch!' (John 20, 17). And even if the tardy twin Thomas *is* invited to put his finger in the nail prints and his hand in the wounded side, Jesus chides his weak faith and implies that belief *without* the testimony of bodily evidence is better (John 20, 27-29). Everywhere one turns in the gospel literature, the language surrounding Easter is ominously empty and distant; it resembles voices ricocheting in vacant rooms. John and the Synoptics speak of young men or announcing angels whose terrible message confirms that 'He is *not here!*' (John 2; Matthew 28, 6; Mark 16, 6; Luke 24, 6). *Not here!*

² J.-L. MARION: *In Excess: Studies of Saturated Phenomena*, transl. R. HORNER & V. BERRAUD (New York 2002) 157 (emphasis added).

³ See A. ROUSSEAU et al. (eds.): *Irénée de Lyon: Contre les Hérésies* (Paris 1965 = Sources chrétiennes 100, part 2), Book IV.34.1, p. 846-849.

⁴ J.-L. MARION: 'The Gift of a Presence', in *Prologomena to Charity*, transl. S. LEWIS (New York 2002) 124-152; here, 124.

The *empty* tomb has become a void, a vacancy, a rock-hewn icon of loss and absence.

Luke's gospel, moreover, confronts us with a further surprise. The disciples on the road to Emmaus meet not a welcome, familiar presence but a garrulous Stranger who, when finally recognized in the breaking of bread, instantly '*vanishes* from their sight' (Luke 24, 31). *Aphantos egeneto*, the Greek text of Luke 24, 30 says; 'He became *invisible*'. Nor does the Ascension scene in Acts console us. Far from confirming that heaven is a beatifying place of presence, Acts 1, 9 tells us that 'a cloud *took* [Jesus] from their sight', *seized* him and *concealed* him. The Ascension seems to snatch the Risen One away, to abduct him, to erase the evidence, to exchange Christ's *body* for a void. Luke's account produces not a new presence but a disappearance.

Paradoxically, then, Easter not only intensifies the problematic of presence; it further complicates the possibility of naming God. Wolfhart Pannenberg once wrote that in the Easter mystery, 'the Revealer of the eschatological will of God became the very *incarnation* of [that] eschatological reality itself.'⁵ That may be quite true, yet at the very moment when God's eschatological promise to humanity is embodied and fulfilled in Jesus' rising from the dead, our *access* to that presence is cancelled, cut off.

Aphantos egeneto: he became invisible. As counterintuitive as it may seem, the very incarnation of the eschatological reality that embodies God's decision to abide forever with us in the risen flesh of Christ is translated, in the Christian scriptures, *not as a discourse of proximity and presence, but as a discourse of absence*, disappearance, distance, and invisibility. As the opening scenes in Acts suggest, Jesus' Ascension is a farewell, a leave-taking, *going away*. The disciples are left standing speechless, looking up into an empty sky.

1.2. The Philosophical Source

So the first source of the postmodern crisis in liturgical prayer is biblical; it flows from the Easter narrative itself. If God's eschatological will and presence are revealed in the person and work of Jesus – if they abide forever in the glorified flesh of the Risen One and are embodied in the ritual repertoire of Christ's Body the church – why do the Christian scriptures speak a post-Easter discourse of *disappearance, distance, and absence*? In a nutshell, why does Jesus have to 'go away' in order to be present? Already on the pages of the gospels, the Easter *mystery* has become a *message* and Christ's risen *body* an inscribed *text*, a topic for debate and discussion. The Emmaus story reaches its climax in a *request for presence* ('Stay with us, sir, for it is almost evening'), but it begins and ends as gossip – which is, of course, a short definition of Christian worship itself, for the liturgy *is* the church's public gossip about God, its rumors about One whose *presence* can be discerned, named, and known only as an *absence*.

⁵ W. PANNENBERG: *Jesus, God and Man*, transl. L.L. WILKINS & D.A. PRIEBE (Philadelphia 1977) 367 (text slightly modified; emphasis added).

Thus, while Christian *scripture* speaks a post-paschal discourse of *disappearance*, *distance*, and *absence*, Christian *liturgy* speaks the language of *presence* and *gift*. Here, we stand on the threshold of the second dilemma that affects liturgical prayer in postmodern cultures: *the philosophical dilemma*. Permit me to introduce my discussion of this dilemma by appealing to a perhaps surprising source, a philosopher who has said of himself, 'I quite rightly pass for an atheist.' I refer, of course, to Jacques Derrida.⁶ In his essay – entitled in English 'A Silkworm of One's Own (Points of View Stitched on the Other Veil)' – Derrida writes:⁷

I simply place my fingers or lips on it, almost every evening (...)
 I touch it without knowing what I am doing
 or asking in so doing, especially not knowing
 into whose hands I am entrusting myself,
 to whom I'm rendering thanks. But to know at least two things
 – which I invoke here for those who are foreign (...)
 to the culture of the tallith, this culture of shawl and not of veil:
blessing and death.

Derrida speaks devoutly here of his 'lifelong companion,' which is not a person but 'a veil (...) a white tallith, a [Jewish] prayer shawl'.⁸ Indeed, the superscription which Derrida chose for 'A Silkworm of One's Own' is a famous text from Book Ten of Augustine's *Confessions: Sero te amavi* ('Late have I loved you') – hardly the choice one would expect from a philosopher who claims to 'pass for an atheist'.⁹

As a matter of fact Derrida's more recent writing reveals him as a man of the tallith, a man of prayer and desire, even (or especially) if he cannot 'determinately identify what he desires,' and even (or especially) if his prayer 'lacks the security of an assured destination'.¹⁰ In his *Circumfession*, Derrida admits his life has been 'a long history of prayers', that he has 'lived in prayer [and] tears'.¹¹ And that is why he loves his lifelong companion, his prayer shawl, so much: 'Textile, tactile, tallith', he exclaims in 'A Silkworm of One's Own':¹²

My reference cloth [has been] neither a veil nor a canvas, but a shawl. A prayer shawl I like to *touch* more than to see, to *caress* every day, to *kiss* without even

⁶ J. DERRIDA: 'Circumfession: Fifty-nine Periods and Periphrases', in G. BENNINGTON & J. DERRIDA: *Jacques Derrida* (Chicago 1993) 155.

⁷ H. CIXOUS & J. DERRIDA: *Veils*, transl. G. BENNINGTON (Stanford CA 2001) 44-45.

⁸ J.D. CAPUTO: 'Shedding Tears Beyond Being: Derrida's Confession of Prayer', in J.D. CAPUTO & M. SCANLON (eds.): *Augustine and Postmodernism: Confessions and Circumfession* (Indiana 2005) 95-114: 113, n.1.

⁹ See CIXOUS & DERRIDA: *Veils* 19 (page number does not appear in text).

¹⁰ Quotations in this sentence are from CAPUTO: 'Shedding Tears Beyond Being' 111, 112.

¹¹ DERRIDA: 'Circumfession' 38, 40.

¹² CIXOUS & DERRIDA: *Veils* 42-43.

opening my eyes or even when it remains wrapped in a paper bag into which I stick my hand at night, eyes closed. (...) one wears it, sometimes right against one's skin. *Voilà* another skin, but one incomparable to any other skin, to any possible article of clothing. It veils or hides nothing, it shows or announces no Thing, it promises the intuition of nothing.

Textile, tactile, tallith. For Derrida, the prayer shawl embodies desire: desire for the unknown, the unknowable, the unnamable, the impossible. Indeed, over the course of his career, Derrida has become, in John Caputo's apt phrase, 'an apostle of the impossible', and *impossibility lies at the very heart of deconstruction*.¹³ Yet it is also important to note that deconstruction is not denial and impossibility is not sheer negation. Deconstruction, writes John D. Caputo, turns on 'a hope, a sigh, a dream, for what is not yet and can never be given'.¹⁴ So deconstruction, Derrida argues, sees the *impossible* – the *unattainable* – as the trigger, the very 'condition of desire. (...) We continue to desire, to dream, *through* the impossible'.¹⁵

What deconstruction deals with, then, is desire, the endless deferral of appropriation, of arrival. Indeed, one may define deconstruction as 'desire going toward the 'absolute other', desire 'that renounces the momentum of appropriation'.¹⁶ So it is essential to remember Derrida's 'impossible desire' when one reads his comments about prayer and about 'saving God's name'.¹⁷

- Of him there is nothing said that might hold
- Save his name [*Sauf son nom*; 'Safe, his name']
- Save the name which means nothing that holds, not even a *Gottheit*, nothing whose withdrawal does not carry away every phrase that tries to measure itself against him. 'God' 'is' the name of this bottomless collapse, of this endless desertification of language.

Here Derrida is not simply embracing apophatic ('negative') theology of the sort found in Meister Eckhart. On the contrary, Derrida will argue that, when all is said and done, apophatic theology is a sly attempt to smuggle hyper-transcendence and hyper-essentialism *back into* God-talk. Deconstruction is not a theory about the *limits* of language; it says nothing, as such, about predication, positive or negative. Nor does it say anything about de-nomination, Jean-Luc

¹³ See J.D. CAPUTO: 'Apostles of the Impossible: On God and the Gift in Derrida and Marion', in J.D. CAPUTO & M.J. SCANLON (eds.): *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington 1999) 185-222.

¹⁴ CAPUTO: 'Apostles of the Impossible' 218-219.

¹⁵ J. Derrida, comment in 'On the Gift: A Discussion between Jacques Derrida and Jean-Luc Marion', moderated by Richard Kearney, in J.D. CAPUTO & M.J. SCANLON (eds.): *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington 1999) 54-78: 72.

¹⁶ J.D. CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears of Jacques Derrida* (Bloomington 1997) 62.

¹⁷ J. DERRIDA: *On the Name*, transl. D. WOOD, J.P. LEAVEY JR & I. MCLEOD; ed. TH. DUTOIT (Stanford CA 1993) 55-56.

Marion's term for a 'third way' of 'un-naming' God that (in his view) avoids the traps of both cataphatic and apophatic theology.¹⁸ Hence, deconstruction is not a 'saturated phenomenon', where what is given, as a phenomenon, exceeds and overwhelms 'what the concept can receive, expose, and comprehend' – in such a way that what is given disqualifies *every* concept and knowledge is undone not by a *lack* but by an *excess*.¹⁹ Deconstruction is not 'excess conquer[ing] comprehension' and thereby defeating whatever 'language can say'.²⁰ It is much humbler. Deconstruction is a pragmatic device, a tool for keeping human speech honest – and in that lies its usefulness for understanding the kind of language we meet in liturgical prayer: it is a form of speech one might call 'a pragmatics of the desert', a desertification of language', a sort of 'survivor's guide for a journey through the wilderness'. It has more in common, perhaps, with the medieval Zen aesthetic of the 'spare, the withered, and the chill' [*karu, hie, yase*], a mode of awareness and apprehension that resists the 'conceptualized picture of the world', reveals the *nonexistence* of things as 'fixed and distinct objects', and highlights *freedom* from self-will, contrivance, and egocentric perception.²¹

Thus, despite the fears of its ecclesiastical detractors, deconstruction doesn't deny or threaten faith. On the contrary, it names 'The passion for the impossible' as 'the passion of faith' itself.²² Deconstruction's relentless deferral and undecidability go 'hand in hand with a certain faith, *sans savoir, sans avoir, sans voir* (...) a certain passion of non-knowing'.²³ It thus describes 'the very condition of fidelity, (...) the fidelity of faith, the very way faith is engaged'.²⁴ As John Caputo puts it, faith is precisely 'a decision inscribed in undecidability where undecidability is (...) [a structural] ingredient [of] faith, not the opposite of faith but the [very] element [the native soil] of faith'.²⁵ Faith, then, is a path that must pass through *kenosis*, through the desert place where God's trace burns and scars language 'as He leaves the world', through 'the aporia of the *sans*,' the 'without'.²⁶

Ironically, then, perhaps only deconstruction can help us grasp what it means to say that the language of liturgical prayer and sacramental celebration is quintessentially the language of *faith*. 'In deconstruction, faith says yes to the stranger to come, [says] yes to the stranger to whose shores deconstruction

¹⁸ See J.-L. MARION: 'In the Name: How to Avoid Speaking of "Negative Theology"', in J.D. CAPUTO & M. SCANLON (eds.): *God, the Gift, and Postmodernism* (Bloomington 1999) 20-42, p. 24-28.

¹⁹ MARION: 'In the Name' 39, 40.

²⁰ MARION: 'In the Name' 40.

²¹ D. HIROTA: *Wind in the Pines: Classic Writings of the Way of Tea as a Buddhist Path* (Fremont CA 1995) 46, 51-53.

²² CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears* 63.

²³ CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears* 63-64.

²⁴ CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears* 64.

²⁵ CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears* 64.

²⁶ CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears* 45, 63.

points without attempting to land, to explore or, [heaven] forbid, to conquer. It says yes with an affirmation that is ‘unconditional, imperative, and immediate.’²⁷ And ‘saying yes to the stranger,’ assenting to the ‘presence of absence’ (without sadness or resentment) is precisely the language of *faith* that is liturgy’s ‘native tongue.’ As the famous Byzantine troparion for the Burial of Christ says:²⁸

Give me that Stranger,
 who had wandered since his youth as a stranger.
 Give me that Stranger,
 by hatred slain, as a stranger.
 Give me that Stranger,
 whom I behold with wonder, seeing him a guest of death (...)
 Give me that Stranger,
 who, being a stranger, has no place to rest his head.

2. The Structure of Saying ‘Yes’

Welcoming the stranger, saying *yes* to the stranger, was precisely the challenge faced by the disciples on their way to Emmaus in Luke 24, a text to which I’ve already drawn attention. Earlier, I suggested that Luke’s story confronts us with a discourse of *disappearance, distance, and absence* – with a language that seems quite the opposite of the ‘discourse of presence’ we might expect the liturgy to speak. As Luke describes the scene, ritual slowly gives rise to recognition. During a meal, the Stranger takes bread, blesses, breaks, and gives it to the disciples, whose ‘eyes are opened’ so that they ‘*recognize* him’ (Luke 24, 31). On the surface, the story seems to move smoothly from *not seeing* to *seeing*, from *incomprehension* to *understanding*, from the Stranger’s *concealed identity* to *revelation*, from *ritual* to *revelation*. But Luke’s simple story-structure is deceptive, for at the very moment of recognition – of revelation, arrival, fulfillment, and appropriation – *at that very moment*, the Stranger vanishes! Before the disciples ever have a chance to react or respond to his self-revelation, the Risen One *disappears*.

This is surely not the result that any rational reader would hope for, but, as I will try to show, it begins to make sense if we look at the Emmaus story through the lens of deconstruction. As most interpreters agree, the Emmaus story links an experience of ritual and revelation to the dawning of faith within the disappointed disciples. But precisely *how* this linkage happens is key – and on that point, opinions vary. In an essay first published in 2001, Jean-Luc Marion argued that the disciples’ basic problem as they trudged toward Em-

²⁷ CAPUTO: *The Prayers and Tears* 45, 63.

²⁸ This troparion is used in the Byzantine Liturgy on ‘Great and Holy Saturday’, during the ‘Office of the Burial of Christ’. For more about its use and about the other texts found in the same Office, see J. RAYA & J. DE VINCK: *Byzantine Daily Worship* (Allendale NJ 1969) 825-834.

maus was *incomprehension*.²⁹ They had *seen* things happen, but couldn't say – couldn't name, understand, or interpret – what they had seen. Theirs was a hermeneutical failure. They *saw* (indeed, they witnessed quite clearly) the events of Jesus' last days and hours – his trial, his execution, and the confusing reports that surfaced on Easter morning. They *saw*, but lacked the ability to *comprehend* what they had witnessed. This, Marion suggests, is *always* – and for *everyone* – the fundamental problematic of faith: As he writes: 'Standing before the Christ in glory, in agony, or resurrected, it is always words (and thus concepts) that we lack in order to say what we see, in short to see that with which intuition [immediate awareness prior to conceptualization] floods our eyes'.³⁰ We simply don't have, Marion writes, the 'concepts capable of handling a gift without measure and [thus], overwhelmed, dazzled, and submerged by [Christ's] glory, we no longer see anything [at all]. The light plunges us into blackness – with a luminous darkness'.³¹

In Marion's view, the disciples' final state is worse than their first: initial intuition – 'seeing' – has been replaced by blindness. The disciples grope blindly about because *excessive light* bedazzles them. This problem of radical incomprehension, Marion contends, can only be overcome by *revelation* – a revelation that arrives from *elsewhere*, from an *Other*, from the 'Father himself' and not from flesh and blood (Matthew 16, 17). At table, in the breaking of bread, the Stranger delivers to the disciples the much-needed and previously missing hermeneutic that overcomes incomprehension. Revelation thus happens as *verbs et gesta*, as 'saying' and 'showing'. In a nutshell, the Risen One's ritual gives revelation and arouses recognition. At last, the disciples are empowered to 'say' what they 'saw'. Their hermeneutical deficiency has been overcome.

As a result, Marion suggests, the Emmaus story provides a key for understanding the structure of *all* Christian faith. Faith begins not with 'seeing', but with the recognition that we must 'request the hermeneutic', must seek understanding, interpretation, and illumination from an *Other*. As long as the disciples were mere spectators – voyeurs – the mystery of Easter remained opaque and unintelligible. Their eyes began to open *only* when they asked the Stranger to give them '*his* meaning, *his* concept, *his* interpretation of the public, yet unintelligible,' events of Easter.³² 'What we lack in order to believe,' writes Marion.³³

²⁹ J.-L. MARION: 'They Recognized Him; and He Became Invisible to Them', in *Modern Theology* 18,2 (April 2002) 145-152; originally published as 'Ils le reconnurent et lui-même leur devint invisible', in J. DUCHESNE (ed.): *L'avenir de l'église. Hommage su Cardinal Lustiger* (Paris 2001).

³⁰ MARION: 'They Recognized Him' 148.

³¹ MARION: 'They Recognized Him' 148.

³² MARION: 'They Recognized Him' 150.

³³ MARION: 'They Recognized Him' 150 (emphasis added).

is quite simply one with what we lack in order to see. Faith does not compensate, (...) it allows reception of the intelligence of the phenomenon and the strength to bear the glare of its brilliance. Faith does not [make up] the deficit of evidence – *it (...) renders the gaze apt to see the excess of the pre-eminent saturated phenomenon, (...) Revelation.*

In sum, Marion argues, faith comes not as compensation but as a radical *displacement* triggered by a divine revelation. That revelation happens when Christ's words, 'his own significations and concepts allow [the disciples] at last to constitute the intuition [immediate awareness/sensible apprehension] (...) into a complete phenomenon.' This, Marion concludes, is the purpose of revelation: 'to re-place', to displace, all human intuition 'into the significations of God; for all the intuitions that we receive from the *gesta Christi* can only be understood according to their final intention'.³⁴ As recipients of revelation, the disciples do not constitute themselves as believers; *God* constitutes them.

Marion's interpretation of the Emmaus story clearly shows us his strategy of de-nomination, his theory of God's radical Otherness, and his phenomenology of the 'saturated phenomenon'. As is well known, Marion thinks phenomenology begins with the sheer *givenness* of phenomena, and hence his project is to free that givenness from *any* conditions that are external to it. As Fr. Shane Mackinlay notes:³⁵

Marion's insistence on the primacy of givenness in phenomenality entails a radical rethinking both of the phenomenon itself, and of the subject to whom it appears. In place of phenomena appearing as objects or beings, within the limits of horizons imposed by a constituting subject, Marion envisages phenomena as appearing without condition or limits, given by themselves alone. In such an understanding of phenomenality, the subject is no longer a sovereign ego that constitutes phenomena as objects; instead, the subject is the one on whom phenomena impose themselves.

Marion's rethinking of phenomenality culminates in the introduction of a new category of "saturated" phenomena. (...) these phenomena give so much intuition that they exceed any concepts or limiting horizon that a constituting subject might attempt to impose on them. (...) saturated phenomena are given simply as themselves, and are paradigmatic and privileged instances of the givenness of phenomena.

Marion's phenomenological reading of the Emmaus story certainly succeeds in showing *revelation* as a saturated reality that appears ('gives itself') quite apart

³⁴ MARION: "They Recognized Him" 151.

³⁵ This quotation is taken from a summary of a dissertation defended June 6, 2005, at Leuven, by the young Australian theologian, Fr. Shane Mackinlay. The title of his dissertation is: *Interpreting Excess: The Implicit Hermeneutics of Jean-Luc Marion's Saturated Phenomena*. Accessed July 26, 2005, at the website of the KU Leuven: <http://www.kuleuven.ac.be/doctoraatsverdediging/cm/3H05/3H050630.htm>

from any conditions or limits imposed by the ‘constituting subject(s)’. But his reading raises perhaps as many questions as it resolves. In an essay published in July, 2004, Shane Mackinlay argues that Marion’s exegesis of Luke 24 describes a revelation that *imposes itself* on human persons, overwhelms them, thereby rendering its bedazzled recipients *passive subjects* unable to respond, to say ‘yes’ (or ‘no’) to God’s offer.³⁶ Mackinlay suggests that Marion has misread the significance of ‘visibility’ in the Emmaus story. The disciples initially *saw* the events of Jesus’ last hours and days *only because they misunderstood them*.³⁷ From the beginning, in other words, their eyes were ‘wide *shut*’, not wide open. In spite of its surface structure, therefore, the biblical story moves not from *vision* (or ‘intuition’) to *revelation*, but from *misunderstanding* to *faith*. The disciples are bedazzled not at the *beginning* of their journey, but at its *end*. ‘Contrary to Marion’s account,’ Shane Mackinlay concludes:³⁸

the journey to Emmaus is not a story of the previously invisible and dazzling becoming visible. Rather it is a story of that which was visible only because it was misunderstood being revealed in its dazzling and saturated excess, which is beyond the disciples’ capacity to grasp as a visible, constituted phenomenon.

But it is not only the structure of Luke’s story that Marion misreads; he also fails, Mackinlay suggests, adequately to account for the disciples’ *response*, for their ‘saying *yes*’, for their coming to *faith* (see Luke 24, 32-49). The Emmaus journey describes not only a bedazzling, saturating revelation, it also tells how what seemed to be *visible* becomes *invisible*, how ordinary *sight* passes over to *faith*. Without denying that faith includes concepts and content, one must say, as Mackinlay does, that³⁹

faith is not constituted by a conceptual understanding of Jesus’ claims, but rather by the acceptance of those claims – both the ones that he makes about himself, and also the ones that he makes on them. By their acceptance of him in faith, a space is opened in which his revelation can be manifested to them, and so their eyes are opened to recognize him in his glory.

³⁶ S. MACKINLAY: ‘Eyes Wide Shut: A Response to Jean-Luc Marion’s Account of the Journey to Emmaus’, in *Modern Theology* 20,3 (July 2004) 447-456.

³⁷ MACKINLAY: ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ 451-452.

³⁸ MACKINLAY: ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ 452. Marion has unintentionally read the Emmaus story in reverse, by assuming that ‘the phenomenon that was *initially* excessive and saturated’ is ‘now seen as an ordinary constituted object – as something that is in fact *no longer* excessive or saturated. However, the dynamic of the Emmaus story is quite the reverse of this; it moves from a clearly gasped object to an excessive phenomenon, which is so ungraspable that it disappears from sight.’

³⁹ MACKINLAY: ‘Eyes Wide Shut’ 452.

Believing begins, therefore, as *openness* to Christ's claims, as *trust* in those claims, and as '*preparedness to make a personal commitment* in response'.⁴⁰ For Christians, faith is always a living, embodied 'yes', an historical '*existential* comportment that defines a relationship of openness, acceptance and trust before God, which is the condition for revelation to happen in the first place'.⁴¹ It is precisely this new openness that gives the disciples on the road to Emmaus 'a hermeneutic space in which Jesus' revelation can be manifested to them – a revelation so dazzling that he disappears from ordinary visibility'.⁴²

There is yet another dimension to the Emmaus story that Jean-Luc Marion neglects – a dimension that is vital for understanding the language of liturgical prayer as a fundamental *language of faith*. In his admirable study, *Symbol and Sacrament*, Fr. Louis-Marie Chauvet calls attention to the fact that faith and grace require a letting-go of '*our desire to master things* through an explaining science or a calculating will'.⁴³ Indeed, God can be thought at all *only* by starting from an absence; we come alive to the question of God only by consenting to the distress of this absence, only by assenting to *loss*.⁴⁴ Our mode of grasping God can *only* be *Gelassenheit*, a *disappropriation* that takes the form of gracious welcome, a 'letting-enter-into-presence'.⁴⁵ This attitude, Chauvet insists, is what shapes the story in Luke 24. In a word, the Emmaus story is not only a journey from revelation to recognition, it is also a journey from 'seeing' to hearing and believing. 'The passage to faith,' writes Fr. Chauvet:⁴⁶

requires that one let go of the desire to see-touch-find, to accept in its place the hearing of a word (...) a word recognized as the word of God. (...) the desire to see (...) the desire to know (...) the desire to find (...) the desire to prove – can only (...) direct us back toward [Jesus] dead body.

Moreover, faith is not only conceptual and existential, it is also *ecclesial* – and this point, neglected by Marion, is also present in the Emmaus account. Every text presumes a '*pre-text*', and the pre-text in Luke's account, Chauvet argues, is the *church*, the visible community of believers. Thus, the Emmaus story was written with a specific question in mind: 'If Jesus is truly the *Living One* (Luke 24, 5), then why can't we see him?' Luke's short answer is '*hè ekklesia*': Passing over to faith requires not only assent to absence and consent to loss, but acceptance of the community of believers as the 'new visibility' of the Risen One.

⁴⁰ MACKINLAY: 'Eyes Wide Shut' 453 (emphasis added).

⁴¹ MACKINLAY: 'Eyes Wide Shut' 453.

⁴² MACKINLAY: 'Eyes Wide Shut' 453.

⁴³ L.-M. CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, transl. P. MADIGAN & M. BEAUMONT (Collegeville MN 1995) 61 (emphasis in the original).

⁴⁴ CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament* 62.

⁴⁵ CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament* 61.

⁴⁶ CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament* 162.

'Luke insists on this point,' writes Chauvet: '(...) the *Absent One* [the One who 'vanished from their sight'] is present in his 'sacrament' which is the Church (...) It is in these forms of witness by the Church that Jesus takes on a body and allows himself to be encountered'.⁴⁷ That may well be the reason why, as the distinguished American exegete Fr. Robert Karris has noted, Luke emphasizes the theme of *hospitality* in the Emmaus story: 'the disciples' eyes are fully opened *only after they have shown hospitality to a stranger*'.⁴⁸

We are now in a better position to understand the essential relation between Luke's discourse of *distance, disappearance, and absence* and the practice of faith in hospitality and sacrament, in pastoral care and ecclesial cult. Faith requires the '*renunciation of a direct line, one could say a Gnostic line, to Jesus Christ*'.⁴⁹ In summoning a consent to loss, faith simultaneously summons an assent to (ecclesial, sacramental, and liturgical) *mediation*. At table in Emmaus, the disciples' eyes open on *emptiness* – 'he vanished from their sight' (Luke 24, 31); but it is⁵⁰

the emptiness of the invisibility of the Lord each time the Church breaks bread in memory of him; (...) this emptiness is penetrated by his symbolic presence because the disciples have just realized that whenever the Church takes bread, pronounces the blessing, breaks, and distributes it – it is he, the Church's Lord, who continues to take the bread of his life given for others; to direct to God the thanksgiving prayer; to break the bread, as his own body was broken, to achieve unity for us all; and to give it saying, 'This is my body.' In the time of the Church, in which our story takes place, Jesus the Christ is absent as 'the same;' he is no longer present except as 'the Other'.

Chauvet's reading of the Emmaus account leads us back to the optic of deconstruction, to Jacques Derrida's insight about 'saying 'yes' to the Stranger.' As I noted earlier, faith is not only conceptual, it is trustful and *responsive*; and hence it presumes that the human subject is not just passively overwhelmed by revelation's dazzling light. As Shane Mackinlay notes, 'a phenomenon's appearing to a subject should be understood as *active reception of what is given*, rather than as the imposition of pure givenness on a passive recipient'.⁵¹ Saturated phenomena such as revelation⁵²

do not simply give themselves from themselves; rather they are presented and understood in a hermeneutic space that is opened by a subject's active reception. (...)

⁴⁷ CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament* 163.

⁴⁸ R. KARRIS: 'The Gospel According to Luke', in R.E. BROWN et al. (eds.): *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Englewood Cliffs NJ 1990) section 43, paragraph 196, 720 (emphasis added).

⁴⁹ CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament* 172 (emphasis in the original).

⁵⁰ CHAUVET: *Symbol and Sacrament* 170.

⁵¹ MACKINLAY: Summary of dissertation *Interpreting Excess* (see note 34, above) (emphasis added).

⁵² MACKINLAY: Summary of dissertation *Interpreting Excess* (see note 34, above).

Instead of assigning primacy solely to the ‘pure,’ ‘absolute’ and ‘unconditioned’ givenness of phenomena, the appearing of phenomena is better understood as a middle-voiced happening, so that neither phenomena nor the recipient are described in terms that are exclusively active or passive. Such a description reflects the essential interrelatedness between phenomena, the subject to whom they appear, and the world in which the event of that appearing occurs.

Christian worship, like the saturated phenomenon of revelation itself, happens in the grammatical space of the ‘middle voice’, a voice which simultaneously signifies ‘acting’ and ‘acted upon’, constituting and constituted, (active) agency and (passive) reception. Liturgical prayer is thus an activity which belongs to the structure of an ongoing revelation that reveals Christ’s (absent) body as accessible in the historical body of people called ‘church’, in acts of care and cult, in hospitality to the stranger, in Word and Sacrament.

To put the point in Derridean terms, we might say that Christian liturgy speaks not the metaphysical language of presence, but the responsorial language of ‘yes’. Saying yes, Derrida observes, is always ‘double’. For the word ‘yes’ not only assents, it also *promises* (i.e., embodies the speaker’s pledge and intention for the future).⁵³ As Derrida puts it, ‘The ‘first’ [yes] is already, always a confirmation: *yes, yes, a yes*, which goes from *yes* to *yes* or which comes from *yes* to *yes*’.⁵⁴ *Yes* is, in effect, an *Urwort*, an ‘originary word’ that becomes a ‘silent companion’ in all our utterances. When we say yes – in acts of faith and prayer – we never know where our assent will take us. We take a risk by starting something we cannot be sure we will (or can) finish. *Yes* ‘institutes and opens language (...) exceeds and incises language, (...) is and is not of language’.⁵⁵ That is why, for Derrida, faith (fidelity) always ‘has the structure of the *signature*’.⁵⁶ That *second* yes – trust, engagement, promise, pledge – must always ‘put its signature on the first,’ must always ‘countersign the first’.⁵⁷

That is why I have argued, throughout this paper, that the language of *liturgy* is the language of *faith* – and that the language of faith is the language of *saying yes*. The revelatory language of liturgy does not render participants merely passive recipients of God’s ‘pure act of givenness’ (as Jean-Luc Marion’s model suggests), but opens space that permits us to ‘recognize and respond’, as did the disciples on the road to Emmaus. The ‘voice’ of liturgical language is neither ‘active’, simply, nor ‘passive’, simply; it is a *middle voice* that permits participants to be simultaneously actors and acted upon, agents and recipients, constitutors

⁵³ See J. DERRIDA: ‘A Number of Yes (Nombre de Oui)’, transl. B. HOLMES, in M. MCQUILLAN (ed.): *Deconstruction: A Reader* (Edinburgh 2000) 97-106. See also M. DE CERTEAU: *A Mystic Fable* vol. 1: *The Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, transl. M.B. SMITH (Chicago 1992).

⁵⁴ DERRIDA: ‘A Number of Yes’ 101.

⁵⁵ DERRIDA: ‘A Number of Yes’ 101.

⁵⁶ DERRIDA: ‘A Number of Yes’ 66 (emphasis added).

⁵⁷ DERRIDA: ‘A Number of Yes’ 66.

and constituted. The source of liturgical language's 'middle voice' is God's own inner life, revealed in God's gracious self-communication and self-bestowal in the mystery of Christ.

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