

Tabernacles & Victims

One divine presence in two sacred places

The words of the wisdom saying “What you focus on determines what you miss” apply to an incident that occurred recently in a local parish. St. Michael the Archangel Church in Georgetown, Del., was vandalized on Aug. 14. The thieves emptied poor boxes and stole vessels for Mass and a monstrance. But the most grievous offense in the break-in was tearing the tabernacle from its moorings, throwing it outside, and strewing the Blessed Sacrament on the grounds. One of the mysteries of the Catholic faith is that the consecrated bread contains the real presence of Jesus Christ. It is reserved in tabernacles for public adoration and private prayer. It is also taken from there to those who are housebound or in hospitals or nursing homes to strengthen their faith lives as they journey through sickness. To violate the Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Jesus reserved in tabernacles desecrates a sacred space. For this reason a church must be closed and reconsecrated before it can be used again for worship.

A pastor in the diocese was quoted in the newspaper as saying, “To have a tabernacle vandalized is a deep spiritual wound.” This comment is where the aforementioned wisdom saying is particularly meaningful. It stirred some new questions in me: What about all the children whose lives were vandalized in the presence of tabernacles through sexual abuse by pedophile clergy? Would their moral defilement be categorized as a “deep spiritual wound?” Would it be serious enough to invoke a canonical imperative to close and resanctify those churches? If we limit our focus to only the violation of the Eucharist reserved in tabernacles, then what piece of pastoral care is missing concerning the violations inflicted on the living tabernacles of the

Body of Christ in all the innocent children who were raped and abused in confessionals, sacristies, choir lofts, and other areas within sight of those church tabernacles?

Connecting the scandal of desecrating the Eucharist with the scandal of violating innocent children in sacred spaces leaves me asking why I have yet to hear that those churches were closed and reconsecrated. It makes me wonder about whether the sanctity of the human person as the dwelling of God is anchored in the same theology as the sanctity of the Eucharist reserved in tabernacles. I am saddened to think that desecrating the presence of Jesus Christ in a baptized child by abuse in a church can be swept aside while desecrating the presence of Jesus Christ in the tabernacle requires the church to be closed, swept pure, and then reconsecrated. What does it mean that there is a special ritual for the latter desecration but not for the former?

Many of the children whose human dignity was attacked and stolen by sexual abuse in churches were past their first communion age. That means they were old enough to sacramentally signify the meaning of St. Augustine’s words to his people in fourth-century Hippo, northern Africa: “Become what you receive, a blessing for the world.”

To not link the real presence of Christ reserved in tabernacles with the sacramental presence of Christ in the members of the Christian community is to miss the incarnational piece of eucharistic theology that sanctifies and elevates the dignity of the human person to the place of being sacred ground for the indwelling presence of Christ. In this respect the pastor’s comments seem to reflect a piety more than a theology. They validate the tabernacle and its furniture as set forth in Exodus 25–31 but miss honoring

Jesus as the true tabernacle in Hebrews 8:1–5. They imply a “high Christology,” in which the tabernacle is an imitation of the heavenly temple where God is adored, to the neglect of a “low Christology,” in which Jesus, “the greater and perfect tent (not made with hands)” (Heb 9:11), is the dwelling place of God with people. Limiting the eucharistic presence to tabernacles misses a pivotal point in the teachings of the great Doctor of the Church, St. Augustine, “The Eucharist is our daily bread. The power belonging to this divine food makes it a bond of union. Its effect is then understood as unity, so that, gathered into his Body and made members of Him, we may become what we receive” (Sermo 57.)

Pope Benedict XVI upholds this theology in his encyclical letter *Deus Caritas Est*:

The Eucharist draws us into Jesus’ act of self-oblation. More than just statically receiving the incarnate *Logos*, we enter into the very dynamic of his self-giving. The imagery of marriage between God and Israel is now realized in a way previously inconceivable: it had meant standing in God’s presence, but now it becomes union with God through sharing in Jesus’ self-gift, sharing in his body and blood. (13)

St. Augustine found his voice as a pastor and teacher when it came to linking the mystery of the Eucharist with the mystery of the body of Christ, the Church. His theology challenged the fourth century Church of northern Africa to make the same connection in order to keep the bread of life fresh in the hearts of the body of Christ.

Pope Benedict XVI has found a new voice as a pastor and teacher in his ministry of outreach to victims of the clergy sex abuse scandal. During his pastoral visit to the United States in April, he met with a small group of victims and modeled a new style of shepherding them. He expanded that model during his visit to Australia and opened new doors to celebrating Mass with them. In taking his ministry to victims one step further he has put a face on his words, “A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically

fragmented" (*Deus Caritas Est* 14). Like St. Augustine, Pope Benedict XVI is using his office as universal pastor and his voice as a moral teacher to challenge the modern church to keep the bread of life fresh. One way to do that is to worship it as the source of love that reunites the fragmented members of the Christian community, especially the wounded and the victims of abuse who are one with "the Victim whose death has reconciled us to yourself" (Eucharistic Prayer III).

When the victims in the pews, whose lives are fragmented by defilement on the part of violent adults, are not united in love with the Victim on the altar or reserved in tabernacles, then the bread of life becomes stale. The absence of this spiritual connection devalues a "first communion day." If the focus is only on the real presence of Christ in tabernacles, then we miss respecting and reverencing the sacramental presence of Christ in those who, according to St. Augustine, "become what they receive."

My priestly life and journey have not been perfect by any means. I have made mistakes and have my share of regrets, but none of them involves the sexual abuse of children. I am thankful every day that a healthy spirituality of Eucharist was the weight that maintained a balance on the scales of life that kept me from tipping toward an addiction to this evil. Keeping that balance by feeding my spiritual life with the fresh bread of love and hope has helped me embrace my imperfections as the path to new fountains of grace and healing. Whenever I go there to replenish inner dry wells, I learn, through the scandal, to love God more deeply by giving my heart to victims. They have taught me a new way to share and speak my love openly for the hurting and fragmented people of God. In my earlier days as a priest, I did not make these connections. But hands-on experiences with victims quickly enabled me to connect those dots.

Theology is colored by experience. My experience over the past five years

has been affected by the demoralizing and sad stories victims have shared with me. From these stories a theology of victimhood has emerged. It has awakened my heart to presiding at Eucharist in a way that sees the victim in everyone. It has influenced the way I use my voice in worship to affirm and not scold, to heal and not wound. It has opened my eyes to notice all the Catholics who receive the Eucharist with downcast eyes and sad faces. This causes me to wonder what their story as victim is all about. Whether they know it or not, it is written on their faces. For me there is now a connection between somber exterior features and a mournful interior life. I now work overtime wearing a smile while distributing the Body and Blood of Christ. One of my conversions through the dark nights of the scandal was to stop wearing the face of a sad, hurting priest. Such an expression made the scandal about me and my defocused need for pity. So I began wearing a healing, hopeful face. It has been contagious for some souls but not for others. If this mystery of the Eucharist is the one true Catholic thing that makes us "become what we receive," then we have much to do to convince people that what we receive is life changing and the source of eternal hope and happiness. One is hard-pressed to make that case given the sad, uninspired faces of the faithful, and the impassive, expressionless faces of many clergy defy any revelation of being the dwelling place of God.

So what can we do to promote ongoing healing and hope in the way we reconsecrate churches desecrated by child sexual abusers? How can those spiritual wounds be soothed by the balm of comfort and care? What is the role of victims still hurting in the reconsecration ritual? How can we move from legal settlements to spiritual renewal; from fragmentation to unity; from a narrow focus on the real presence of Christ-the-victim in the tabernacle to a broader focus that doesn't miss the crucified presence of Christ-the-victim in the wounded human person? How can liturgies of reconsecration of victims advance a praxis of ecclesial healing that links

tabernacles and victims to one theology of Eucharist grounded in St. Augustine's prophetic vision to "become what you receive?"

While I celebrate liturgy as a priest, I am not a liturgical theologian. As a certified spiritual director, I am a caregiver of wounded souls. My religious imagination tells me that searching for answers to these questions requires a conversation between liturgists, parish liturgical ministers, and pastors of souls — especially those souls still living with deep spiritual wounds inside.

My spiritual DNA is colored by hope. On this issue I lean on hope again for two reasons. First, that liturgical rituals designed for the purpose of reconsecrating sacred lives desecrated by sexual abuse will go a long way in healing the inner sacred space of those wounded lives. Second, that the ongoing conversation between designing liturgical services of reconsecration and translating it in to pastoral practice will advance a spiritual theology that focuses on "moving through" the woundedness to healing rather than "moving on" without it. There can be no "moving on" without the kind of authentic spiritual healing that sets us free from inner wounds. That thinking is as ludicrous as a patient's believing in surviving terminal cancer without treatment. It is no less than denying the paschal dimension of the scandal that makes our spiritual wounds the sacred space where healing begins.

In 1991 I lost a dear friend who was killed in a car crash. After the funeral Mass his mother told me, "It will be easier saying good-bye to John by saying hello to you." In one simple sentence she captured the essence of the paschal mystery. It begins with "hello" at birth, moves through "good-bye" at death, and ends in "hello" in the rebirth in eternal life. This paschal rhythm of life cannot be denied when trying to heal desecrated lives caused by clergy sexual abuse any more than it is ignored when sanitizing a church desecrated by vandals. (*continued on page 28*)



I baked small breads to use with my religious community, determined to stamp out the use of machine-stamped white wafers that neither looked like bread nor tasted like food.



Conclusion

Liturgy means “the work of the people” — and people, we have work to do! Ask your pastor to read this article. Bake several eucharistic breads of appropriate size, and invite him to break a piece or two and eat them. Remember to start small. Proper catechesis of the people is essential. Discuss the pros and solve the cons with your liturgical ministry. Recruit a cadre of bakers.

Imagine how you will feel at the preparation of the altar and the gifts at Mass when you hear the presider pray:

Blessed are you, Lord, God of all creation,
Through your goodness we have this bread to offer,
which earth has given and *human hands have made* [my emphasis].
It will become for us the bread of life.

The Roman Missal (from page 10)

Fears that the new translation will restrict the passages marked “in these or similar words” are understandable but unfounded. More of a concern is that some priests will change the new translation to simplify the structure or vocabulary of the prayers. As with anything new, the translations deserve a chance. They are the fruit of careful, loving toil. They will sound different, and the adjustment will be difficult. But the prayers will express more clearly the sentiments of the original Latin, reveal the biblical foundations of our faith, and unite English speakers more closely with the vernacular translations of other cultures and climes. There will be times when freedom of expression is not only permitted but desirable. Together the fixed and flexible texts of the Mass will form one Spirit-filled voice of praise. **ML**

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Truly, “Blessed be God forever.”

Works cited

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Tabernacles & Victims (from page 10)

My hope is that by raising these questions and making these connections, bishops, pastors, and liturgists will bond together in contributing to a new legacy of ecclesial healing so that we do not miss opportunities to focus on the reconsecration of victims grounded in Jesus the victim becoming Jesus our hope. Getting there may be painful, but until we do, we are stuck in the “good-bye” stage of the paschal mystery hidden in this scandal. As in the story of Elijah, a tiny whispering voice within tells me that is not where the living God, the bread of life and the source of all spiritual hope and healing, wants us to be. **ML**

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