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Betsy Cunneen

College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University

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Chauvet and O'Connor: An Encounter of Sacramental Life and Aesthetics

Betsy Cunneen

Louis-Marie Chauvet's work *The Sacraments* contributes to the field of sacramental theology in many ways. Two of his most significant contributions come from a postmodern approach to language and culture, and an understanding of the Christian life immersed in scripture, sacraments, and ethical action. These contributions are also mirrored in the symbolic writing of the literary and theological contribution of Flannery O'Connor. Through an investigation of Flannery O'Connor's short stories and lectures, I hope to demonstrate that her fiction both elucidates Chauvet's claims regarding symbolic language which help shape the reality of Christian life and offer the additional aspect of aesthetics, to Chauvet's triadic model. Because O'Connor uses symbolic language to promote the Christian life, which Chauvet proposes, she offers another level of symbolization to Christian identity through the artistic medium of her fiction. In order to understand the benefits of Flannery O'Connor's fiction in Chauvet's claims about Christian identity, I will now turn to Chauvet's ideas on symbolic language and Christian life.

Fr. Louis-Marie Chauvet, a French sacramental theologian, reacts to two models of sacramental theology that he finds to be insufficient. The first model is the classical Roman Catholic understanding of sacrament that was the primary means and objective efficacy of the sign that produced grace.¹ Chauvet takes issue with some theological implications resulting from this understanding of sacrament as grace-producing objective reality. Sacraments in this model are imagined as instrument, remedy, channel, and germ.² These images describe sacraments as mediatorial and as signs, pointing to something supernatural and therefore otherworldly and unlike anything of the natural world. They are understood only as the objective indicator of the divine. The sacraments, in this model, were the principal means of communication with humans,³ acting as a type of bridge between supernature and nature.

They were also the only way in which the natural could communicate with the supernatural (communicate may even be too strong of a word here). Grace received, as a result of the sign-act could be stored up in order to atone for sins committed. Chauvet is critical of such a highly economic and linear conception of sacrament.

The subjectivist model has appeared in various times throughout history, and essentially reverses the nature of sacrament as it is articulated in the objectivist model. Instead of sacraments acting as the primary mediators between nature and the divine, a subjectivist view understands humanity as communicating with God directly, and the sacraments are a demonstration of giving thanks for the love of God. Sacrament, in this model, is a "festive expression" of the Spirit moving freely in and through human interactions.⁴ Defining sacraments in this way limits them to their anthropological and ritual meaning. Chauvet describes this type of sacramental theology as understanding its role as "[transmitting] grace, already given by God, into daily life."⁵ Consequently, sacraments are simply responses to God, their only requisite being that they were mandated by Jesus.⁶

In reaction to these insufficient models, Chauvet reflects theologically on the sacramental model proposed by the Second Vatican Council. This model proposes a triangular structure, demonstrating the dual movement between God, sacrament, and humankind. God communicates God's self directly to humanity through the movement of the Spirit, as well as through the sacraments (with Christ and through the Spirit). The sacraments are the "summit of the life sanctified by God's grace and the revelatory expression (the sign) of this sanctification."⁷ The Second Vatican Council's proposal is significant for Chauvet, as it brings the previous models out of a linear and into a triadic conception of sacramental theology in which humanity, God, and sacrament participate in giving and receiving grace. This model is the foundation of his argument for a renewed ap-

¹ Louis-Marie Chauvet. *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*. (Collegetown, MN: Liturgical Press, 1997), xiv.

² *Ibid.*, xiv-xv.

³ *Ibid.*, xv.

⁴ *Ibid.*, xix.

⁵ *Ibid.*, xi.

⁶ *Ibid.*, x.

⁷ *Ibid.*, xxiv.

proach in sacramental theology. Chauvet uses this model and applies a subtle linguistic theory to essential aspects of the human life.

One of the most important points of Chauvet's thesis is a post-modern linguistic philosophy. He disproves the traditional conception of language that is understood as created by humans *a posteriori*, that is, as a tool that human beings create after they experience reality, thereby unrelated to their existence in and conceptions of reality.⁸ Chauvet adamantly rejects this model, claiming that without language, "reality would be left to its raw factualness and would be only a chaos or a meaningless jumble."⁹ Therefore, he proposes an understanding of language as mediating reality to individuals, and through which a person constructs reality. From this view, a person never experiences reality in a pure state, in the absence of the influence of language. Chauvet claims that "it is in and by language that human beings are constituted as subjects"¹⁰ precisely because language is not merely an instrument that humans create, but rather the very way in which they are formed in the world. People of all ages exist in this "womb" of reality at the service of language; bombarded with reality through the words that express and give it meaning.

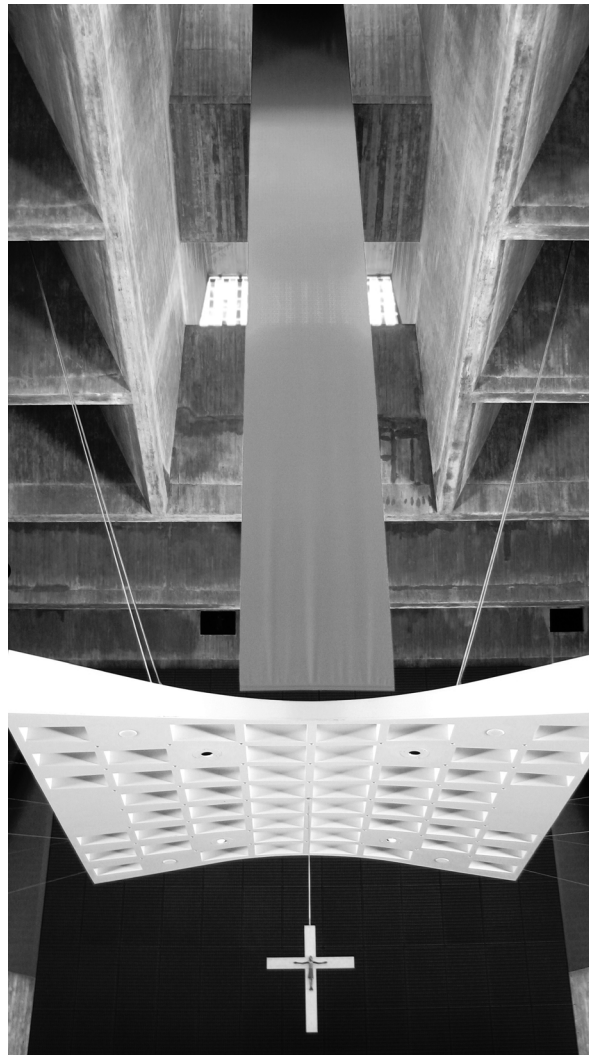
Words are assigned to and give meaning to objects; they possess connotations agreed upon by a particular culture in history. Further, as the building blocks of language, words are that which enables us to perceive the world around us and assign meaning to it, and yet at another level, language adds a tensive and metaphorical language to reality. In other words,

the way in which we describe the world around us is not single layered, but multi-layered, forming a complex reality of images and metaphors through words that change frequently based on our individual and communal experiences. Chauvet defines symbolic order as, "the coherent ensemble of social, cognitive, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical, political values... [that] form a coherent world [in which] every element of universe, society, individual life has meaning only by finding its place...in it."¹¹ Words constitute

and influence *a priori* the meaning that humans give to this symbolic order, which is an interconnected web of social fabric that changes with history. Language, in effect, possesses the ability to give and take away meaning from this framework, shaping our very experience. It is now clear that language acts not only as a lens in which humans conceive of the world, but also as the sole means for creating (or perhaps distorting) the world around them. Chauvet's understanding of language leads him to the conclusion that life is symbolic, and, therefore, the Christian community is also symbolic. An essential element to the symbolic order of the Christian community is sacrament. This is due to the fact that sacraments represent the material that they take on, as well as an idea, or many ideas, that

are beyond the material object. For Chauvet, sacraments are central to the Christian symbolic reality. But yet they do not stand alone; Chauvet sees a deep connection between sacraments, scripture, and ethics. All three are required for Christian identity and experience.

Encountering the sacraments is central to Chauvet's major claim to a fully-lived Christian iden-



⁸ Ibid, 3-4.

⁹ Ibid, 13.

¹⁰ Ibid, 7.

¹¹ Ibid, 14.

tity. In order for a Christian to live in this way, she must be a member of the church. Chauvet envisions the church as a sacramental representation of the fullness of Jesus' person and ministry. Church, for Chauvet, is the expression of the reign of God, and because of this, it is sacramental.¹² It is through the church that Christian life can continue to live out Jesus' message. In order for the Christian to be a full and active member of the church, that is, participating in the reign of God, he must seek to live out certain identifying marks of conversion. Regarding this, Chauvet claims:

It is in the church that faith finds its structure because the church is in charge of keeping alive, in the midst of the world and for its good, the memory of what [Jesus] lived for and why God raised him from the dead: memory through the *Scriptures*, read and interpreted as speaking about [Jesus] or being his own living word; memory through the *sacraments*, recognized as being his own salvific gestures; memory through the *ethical* testimony of mutual sharing, lived as an expression of his own service to humankind.¹³

The three marks of Chauvet's Christian identity as lived in the sacrament of the church are scripture, sacraments, and ethical action. No longer can the definition of a Christian be limited to one who simply professes a creed. Chauvet's definition of Christian life necessitates their encounter with the world and places strong demands on the individual believer. I will now turn to the particular meaning of Chauvet's three marks of ongoing conversion of the individual Christian living in the sacramental church.

First, Chauvet discusses the importance of encounter with scripture. Chauvet identifies scripture as the "unfolding of the apostolic church's confession of faith,"¹⁴ and thus incorporates the Christian tradition that seeks to interpret or reacts to the canon of Scripture. In this sense, Christians must be formed in the biblical narrative as well as theologians, saints, and other Christian literature. Chauvet believes that these supplemental texts help to illuminate the meaning found in scripture, and are therefore essential to the Christian encounter with scripture.

The second mark of Christian identity is sacrament. Most important for this mark are the pri-

¹² Ibid, 29.

¹³ Ibid, 28.

¹⁴ Ibid, 29.

mary sacraments of initiation, baptism and Eucharist. Sacraments also include, however, "everything that pertains to the thankfulness which the church expresses to God."¹⁵ Understood in this way, prayer is included in this mark. While Chauvet gives precedence to baptism and Eucharist, he understands the importance of sacramental actions and objects as meaningful to the Christian life. These various actions have been traditionally referred to as "sacramentals."

The third mark of Christian identity in the church is the ethical dimension. The ethical, for Chauvet, includes all actions, personal, and social done in the name of the gospel (and therefore for humanity).¹⁶ It seems that human action is particularly significant here, and Chauvet also makes the claim that ethics seeks to eradicate social sin. Most intriguing about his ethical claim is his assumption that ethical behavior that promotes the gospel message is also done for the sake of humanity. Sin is not simply an individual's breach of relationship with God, another, or himself, but can occur at the communal level. Chauvet makes the theological assumption that the teleology of the human person is to be in relationship with God. It is this very point from which we can transition to the life and writings of Flannery O'Connor. Although she was interested in creating fiction, her aim is similar to Chauvet's – to engender engagement with God that is formed by symbolic language used to create a Christian identity based on the interplay among scripture, sacraments, and the ethical life.

Flannery O'Connor was a Roman Catholic woman raised in rural south Georgia in the mid-twentieth century. She is most famous for her fiction, particularly her short stories, and "occasional prose"¹⁷ on the meaning and aim of fiction. It is primarily through her personal reflections on fiction that we can gather her theological thought. Predominantly through the text *Mystery and Manners*, we can conclude that Flannery O'Connor's theological convictions had a significant bearing on her approach to writing. Her work may be seen as exemplifying all three of Chauvet's marks for Christian identity and offers the additional mark of aesthetics. This aes-

¹⁵ Ibid, 30.

¹⁶ Ibid, 31

¹⁷ This term is taken from the text *Mystery and Manners*, a collection of her various writings and lectures on the aim and meaning of fiction.

thetical dimension proposes a unique window into the lived Christian life.

Although Flannery O'Connor and Louis-Marie Chauvet wrote in very different contexts and were influenced by different theologies, they both sought to express the importance of language as symbol (not simply as sign), and to promote the meaning of Christian identity as involving engagement with scripture, sacraments, and ethics. In order to demonstrate the strong parallel between these two figures, we will now turn to O'Connor's symbolic approach to writing.

In O'Connor's lecture titled "The Nature and Aim of Fiction," she makes very clear her use of symbolic language in fiction. She says, "I think for the fiction writer himself [sic], symbols are something he uses simply as a matter of course. You might say that these are details that, while having their essential place on the literal level of the story, operate in depth as well as on the surface, increasing the story in every direction."¹⁸

In the same way that Chauvet conceives of language as a womb from which the human person conceives of and creates reality, O'Connor speaks from her purview, a Roman Catholic in the South, and creates a world that reflects the meaning of Christian life that relies on an encounter with sacraments and scripture, and ethical action in response to that encounter. Her characters, although bound by time and place, transcend their characteristics because they act as symbols for expressing the meaning of Christian life. The ideals that Christianity offers, believes O'Connor, is the lived fulfillment of the human person. Her theology is strongly influenced by the incarnation,¹⁹ and her fiction, therefore is incarnational. In effect, because of her Christological and sacramental imagination, her theological message also has a very strong anthropological focus.²⁰ That is, to fully embrace her

belief in living out the fulfillment of the purpose of humanity, one must be Christian. Flannery O'Connor makes clear her "bias" in writing fiction. "I see from the standpoint of Christian orthodoxy. This means that for me the meaning of life is centered in our Redemption by Christ and what I see in the world I see in its relation to that."²¹ Flannery O'Connor's theological beliefs are the primary starting point for her fiction. Her language, characters, and plots are all, in effect, reflections of her Christian ideals. As she says so eloquently, "The writer's business is to contemplate experience."²² Although her type of writing that encourages contemplation of the human experience, does not please all readers, O'Connor understands that she cannot write for the "tired" reader, who desires to "read something that will lift up his [sic] heart."²³ She believes, however, that being a writer is a vocation, something that God has given her as a gift.²⁴ As she writes fiction from her unique perspective, which she defines as manners, she also demands that her art be embedded with the symbols that point to a greater mystery. Manners, for O'Connor, are the way in which she, a Southern, Roman Catholic woman conceives of proper living. There is a strong sense in her writing that she has strong opinions about the human condition, and the correct way to live out the goal and fulfillment of the human person. She believed that the South is somewhat of a seedbed for understanding the way to live a Christian life through manners,²⁵ and she herself believed in the very real and yet transcendent mystery of God. These two concepts come together in her fiction to represent an art form produced with symbolic language and ideas, transcending their immediate meaning, and describing the ways in which humans interact with (or fall away from) the divine.

One of the best ways in which readers draw theological meaning from O'Connor's is from objects that add surface meaning to the development of her short stories, as well as deeper theological meaning. An example of this symbolic language is the beginning of Mrs. Turpin's conversion in O'Connor's short story, "Revelation." In this story, Ruby Turpin has led her entire life believing that she is superior to African Americans and those who are

¹⁸ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux., 1969), 71.

¹⁹ "O'Connor's description of art as incarnational can be described as religiously rooted in her understanding of the Incarnation of Christ; her vision is ordered by the images of creation and the Incarnation." Susan Srigley, *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 17.

²⁰ An incarnational Christology emphasizes the importance of the incarnation for salvation. The very act of Jesus becoming human changes the very ontology of humanity. That is, humans exist in a different way, with a renewed purpose as a result of the incarnation.

²¹ Flannery O'Connor, *Mystery and Manners*. 32.

²² *Ibid*, 84.

²³ *Ibid*, 47.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 81.

²⁵ *Ibid*, 103.

less wealthy or socially pruned. Most of the story is from the standpoint of Mrs. Turpin's thoughts while waiting in a doctor's office. Mrs. Turpin's insistence on social nicety infuriates a young girl, who hurls a book at her head and physically attacks her. As a result of this seemingly near death experience, "Mrs. Turpin felt entirely hollow except for her heart which swung from side to side as if it were agitated in a great empty drum of flesh."²⁶ The young girl's violent action symbolizes the moment at which Mrs. Turpin begins her conversion from the life of judging others. Through this example of Flannery O'Connor's symbolic language, we can infer her conception of the lived Christian life.

Flannery O'Connor also posits a triadic structure of encounter with scripture, sacraments, and ethics. Because Chauvet understood scripture as that which reflects on and refers back to the biblical narrative, her work can be subsumed under scripture. Her work is infused with characters that reflect the biblical text,²⁷ and even more significant, her characters are often confronted with conversion experiences, particularly in the case of Mrs. Turpin's true interior conversion. Shortly after the scene in the doctor's office, she has a vision of "a vast horde of souls were rumbling toward heaven. There were whole companies in which white-trash, clean for the first time in their lives, and bands of black niggers [*sic*] in white robes, and battalions of freaks and lunatics shouting and clapping and leaping like frogs."²⁸ Ruby is left humbled at the thought that the people to whom she has been so critical are entering heaven and asks herself whether she will be among them. Mrs. Turpin's story exemplifies O'Connor's use of visionary symbolism.

A strong sacramental life is also encouraged in Flannery's Christian identity. She herself was

²⁶ Flannery O'Connor. *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*, 503.

²⁷ The many references to scripture, both explicit and implicit in O'Connor's work are too extensive to enumerate here. An example of her use of scripture implicitly is found in the short story, "Parker's Back," in which O. E. Parker falls off of a tractor, setting both the tractor and a nearby tree on fire and leading him to a conversion of sorts. This seems rather similar to the traditional belief in Paul's conversion on his way to Damascus. Other explicit references to scripture are throughout her stories, and often times are from the voice of Southern evangelical preachers. For more of O'Connor's short stories, see *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor*. (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1971).

²⁸ Flannery O'Connor. *The Complete Stories of Flannery O'Connor* 508.

a faithful Catholic, who frequently received the sacraments. Some of her short stories included explicitly Catholic sacraments, and most often are themes on baptism and Eucharist.²⁹ Also, it is possible to argue that reading her fiction possesses a sacramental character in the way that Chauvet defines "sacramental." In this sense, in light of O'Connor's recognition that her writing was God's gift to her, the act of writing must have been a sacramental experience for her. The very language that she used has also been referred to as sacramental in character. Richard Gianonne, a prominent O'Connor scholar agrees and states that she, "Sought nothing less than a sacramental language that rests in the work and in the will of God."³⁰

The third mark of Chauvet's Christian identity, ethics, is also found throughout O'Connor's literature. Susan Srigley is convinced of O'Connor's moral theology infused in her stories.³¹ O'Connor's ability to communicate ethics through story is rather similar to the narrative approach of the biblical literature. Through mythos, that is, story, O'Connor conveys the value of ethical behavior. She is not interested, however, in limiting her vision to how humans should act. As we have seen, her primary vision involves making her readers more aware of the mystery of God and how they are in relationship with God. O'Connor finds that the biblical narrative is useful for forming the moral code in a more profound way than natural law.³² She therefore includes moral and immoral characters in her stories in order to demonstrate their implications, which she feels is more effective than reiterating church teaching.³³

Even when Flannery O'Connor unambiguously includes the marks of Christian identity into her writing, it is not in an explicitly apologetic way. Her writings are not reiterations of

²⁹ For more detail on O'Connor's use of the sacraments in her fiction, see Eds Joanne Halleran McMullen and Jon Parrish Peede. *Inside the Church of Flannery O'Connor: Sacrament, Sacramental, and the Sacred in Her Fiction*. (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 2007).

³⁰ Robert Ellsberg, ed. *Flannery O'Connor: Spiritual Writings*. (New York: Maryknoll, 2003), 21.

³¹ Susan Srigley. *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004), 56.

³² *Ibid*, 56-57.

³³ *Ibid*, 57. For a strong example of the juxtaposition of moral and immoral Christian characters, see her short novel, *Wise Blood*.

the Catechism, but offer an aesthetic dimension to the Christian life and thought, which I argue is just as essential as the other three. In fact, as quoted before, Chauvet claims that a culture is created through symbolic language. His description of symbolic reality includes the aesthetic,³⁴ but he does not include it in his definition of Christian identity. It is at the level of the aesthetic that O'Connor offers the most to the Christian life. Although she may agree with Chauvet on the necessity of scripture, sacraments, and ethical actions, that she expresses these in her fiction demonstrates how essential aesthetics are in Christian conversion. The very encounter with art offers a unique experience to the Christian life, and can and does enrich it. Aesthetics, and O'Connor's work specifically, re-imagines Christian life as living a scriptural, sacramental, and ethical life. I argue that because O'Connor's fiction is accessible to all people, not simply Christians, she reaches out to those who may be unfamiliar with Christianity (and especially with the enriched and full Christian life to which she prophesies!) in a way that the scriptural, sacramental, and ethical do not. Through art, O'Connor meets those who may be expecting to encounter an entertaining short story with interesting characters and possibly plot twists, and what they find instead is an encounter with God and what it means to be truly Christian.

Flannery O'Connor's theology was strongly influenced by Thomas Aquinas, particularly through the theological lens of Jacques Maritain.³⁵ She uses the Thomistic phrase, "art is a value of the practical intellect."³⁶ This means that O'Connor insists that the practice of art is intimately connected with reason and virtue. While this may seem to be a somewhat dry approach to aesthetics, it clearly results in a powerful symbolic and sacramental fiction. Her use of the grotesque effectively grabs the reader's attention without the intent of evoking sentimentality or the obscene.³⁷ Her stories are true art in that they utilize common, everyday experiences in such a way that the reader questions the meaning of life, and encounters a mystery that O'Connor

considers to be the purpose and fulfillment of the human life – Christian life.

In conclusion, it seems that Chauvet's sacramental theology of the late twentieth century is brought to life by Flannery O'Connor's sacramental, scriptural, and ethical themes. Most important, O'Connor offers an additional mark to Chauvet's triadic model for Christian identity. O'Connor wrote in the mid-twentieth century and was influenced by Thomas Aquinas and her social context, the rural South. Although somewhat unexpectedly, Flannery O'Connor can be seen as demonstrating the beauty of Chauvet's claims to Christian life, and Chauvet systematically describes the theology that O'Connor embeds in her fiction. Because O'Connor's sacramental approach to fiction was so unique, theologians will continue to return to her work to discover more meaning from the mystery written in the form of manners, for O'Connor offers myriad images in an attempt to bring imaginative participation into the symbolic order. She presents a unique and powerful form of the Christian life that is holistically focused on the scriptural, sacramental, and ethical.

In one of her lectures on the nature of Catholic novelists, O'Connor elucidates her approach to fiction: "...The fiction writer who [*sic*] writes neither for everybody, nor for the special few, but for the good of what he [*sic*] is writing."³⁸ This is essential for understanding Flannery's work. She is not attempting to develop an ethic, or an ecclesiology, or a sacramental theology. However, all of these ideas (and more!) are embedded in her work. The "good" of which O'Connor is writing is "good in itself [because it] glorifies God because it reflects God."³⁹

³⁴ See footnote 10.

³⁵ Susan Srigley *Flannery O'Connor's Sacramental Art*. 25. Srigley details the ways in which Flannery O'Connor was influenced by Maritain, especially his philosophy of art.

³⁶ Flannery O'Connor. *Mystery and Manners*. 81

³⁷ *Ibid.* 147.

³⁸ *Ibid.* 171.

³⁹ *Ibid.* 171.