

**Vessels for Miracles: a tangible
expression of an unwillingness to
disallow belief**

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Abstract

Currently, there appears to be a crisis among the Catholic faithful in Western societies as many question aspects of their faith and, consequently, drift away from church attendance. My investigative art work is a response to my own doubts about fundamental Catholic teachings, and is intended to explore my own belief in the mysteries of this faith. Through a close examination of the mystery of the Mass and the nature of 'the cult of saints' the investigation questions the reasons that underpin Catholics' belief in miracles.

Through a review of the art of late antiquity and early Christianity, the study examines the nature of, and tension between, superstition and belief. It debates the implicit question "Is all religion superstition?" in an attempt to provide a sound basis for the presentation of reasons for my personal unwillingness to 'disallow belief' in the mysteries of the Faith, despite doubts on their content. It posits the view that, despite the attitude of an 'enlightened' and educated people and the demands of science for verifiable proof for every aspect of life, the ability to experience and acknowledge the unknowable, and thereby retain a sense of mystery, remains a central concern in peoples' lives. In relation to the nature of supernatural events, my art seeks to create a space in the mind for wonder, to encourage the viewer to question the nature of their own belief, and to provide an opportunity to present reasons for my own unwillingness to disallow belief.

My research is principally the studio-based creation of ceramic artworks. In the making process the primary emphasis is on the development of appropriate forms and special surface finishes that facilitate the outcomes presented above, for both the artist and viewer.

A focused review of relevant literature has been carried out and reported in the exegesis to provide a substantive understanding of the nature of the belief systems pertaining to the pagan and early Christian religions of the late Roman era, of Byzantine and Medieval church art, the church of the Reformation, and the views of religious researchers and artists of our own time.

The created work initially takes the form of lidded vessels inspired by examples of 'reliquaries', which are containers for the preserved remains of saints, often kept in churches and museums. Also included are liturgical vessels and tabernacles that are intended to catalyse an exploration of the mystery of the Catholic Mass. These works implicitly ask questions about belief and thereby stimulate responses that may assist the viewer to clarify, for themselves, their own questions of faith and belief.

The forms of the art works are inspired by Byzantine and Medieval reliquaries and other church vessels seen in my study of the art history of these periods. It is through the form and the particular surface treatments that the works seek to engender a sense of the ecclesiastical, of antiquity, and of mystery. An important development has been the personal awareness, through the making of a 'closed' reliquary, of the potential to stimulate a stronger sense of the mystery of the miracles documented by the church. The underpinning notion of this work is that these vessels represent the possibility that there are mysteries which cannot be fully comprehended in this life. By deliberately designing the physical focus of these vessels to be on the 'cult of saints', it is intended that the works will begin a theological dialogue with the viewer regarding questions relating to life after death.

Statement of Authorship

Except where explicit reference is made in the text, this thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma. No other person's work has been relied upon or used without due acknowledgement in the main text and the bibliography of the thesis.

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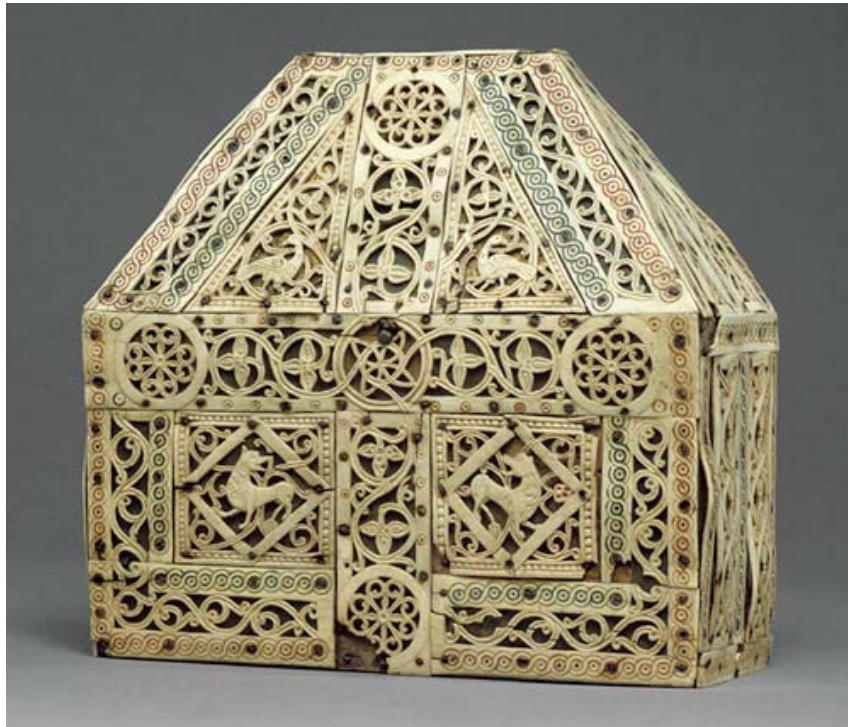


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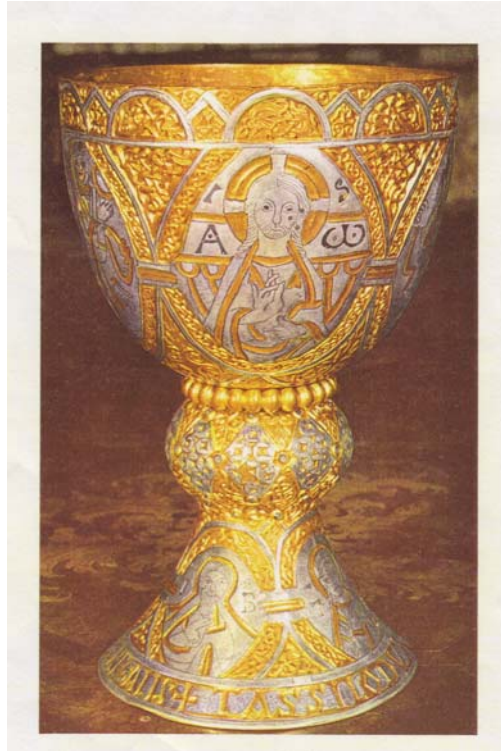


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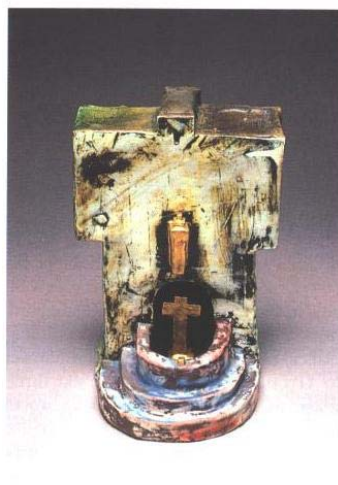
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Preface

An Unwillingness to Disallow Belief

My starting point for this project is a faltering acceptance of the Catholic faith. After a lifelong involvement in church activities and regular mass¹ attendance, I have begun to question fundamental Catholic beliefs and to seek to understand more clearly my current position in relation to the challenging elements of its theology. The many questions that arise in my mind about issues concerning the holding of a personal faith have become a stimulus for creativity in the making of ceramic art, and in turn, a way of seeking personal answers to these questions.

I know that I am not alone in this uncertain stance and that many Western Christians are currently reflecting on their beliefs as a result of losing confidence in elements of the established church. Whilst my artistic reflections began with an expression of anger and disappointment in the church, they have now moved to an exploratory phase, not necessarily denying the core Catholic beliefs but examining them in the hope of clarifying issues for both myself and the viewers of my art.

My personal life-experience has given me a thorough grounding in the theology of the Catholic faith through a childhood lived under the influence of good Christian parents from an Irish-Catholic tradition. This has meant becoming familiar with liturgy as an altar boy, learning Latin at boarding school, and completing my education in a seminary. The latter entailed seven years in a semi-monastic environment studying scripture, the philosophy of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and a year of theology. I did not complete my studies for the priesthood, but took on an active participation in Catholic life in the parishes in which I lived over the next thirty or so years.

¹ 'Mass' is the name given to the Catholic church service performed by an ordained priest. It involves the celebration of the Eucharist, or Holy Communion, in which a specially made wafer of bread and a cup of wine is blessed and then given to the members of the congregation in the church. As a youth I was taught that Catholics must attend Mass each Sunday. Whilst this is still an expectation of practicing Catholics, there is now a more relaxed approach taken to this issue.

This study is intended as a tangible expression of this personal theological journey. It takes on physical expression in the ceramic works of art, created as a means of exploring and questioning. It visits new territory through the writings of authors on the subject of art and religion, and through the process of reflection on created pieces of ceramic art. The journey reaches a conclusion that can be seen as positive growth in understanding, and as, perhaps, another beginning, as a more self-assured artist. During the life of the project the experiences of a number of exhibitions of work, coupled with positive feedback from these exhibitions, have greatly assisted the process. The following pages outline aspects of this journey, culminating in some final personal observations.



“Reliquary # 19, 2006, Church & Faith Series.”
Stoneware, engobes, oxides. 24 x 15 x 15 cm.

Chapter One Introduction – A Crisis of Faith

Evidence of a contemporary crisis in Church Life

The Catholic Church Life Survey reaches into churches across Australia every five years and gathers data on attendance and beliefs of Mass attendees. The survey found that, in 1996, about 18% of Australian Catholics attended church regularly, and that this figure represented a very steep decline in attendance at Mass over the previous ten years.² Since this survey, a further decline to 13 % occurred between 1996 and 2001. Commentators on the survey data chronicle a long list of concerns that are seen in church life at this time, including: disenchantment with the church among today's youth; smaller, older congregations; failure by the church to recognise and respond to the contribution of women in church life; and a significant crisis in the ordained ministry.³

The number of worshippers aged under thirty years who attend Mass remains small, and this is a worrying sign for the future of the church in Australia. In addition, the Church Life survey data indicates that there are many older parishioners, like myself, who are re-evaluating their faith. Recent research indicates that a high proportion of those surveyed gave, as a reason for not attending Mass, 'the irrelevance of the church to life today' and 'the teaching no longer rings true in today's world'.⁴

My own experience of questioning my theological position through art practice has been a valuable one, providing a means of examining my personal beliefs without denying them. The production and exhibition of a considerable body of ceramic artwork over several years has allowed me to expose these ideas to others, and hopefully assist them in the evaluation of their own perspectives on their faith. The

² Mason, Michael, CSSR. "Who Goes to Church These Days and What Do They Believe About God?" *Australasian Catholic Record*, 76, no. 1, Jan. 1999, pp. 15-23.

³ Edwards, Denis. "Correcting the balance: the Holy Spirit and the Church." *Australasian Catholic Record*, 76, no.1, Jan. 1999, p. 259.

⁴ Dixon, Robert et al. "Research project on Catholics who have stopped attending Mass." Pastoral Projects Office, Australian Catholic Bishop's Conference. 2007, p. 28. Retrieved 20 June 2007 from <http://www.ppo.catholic.org.au/pdf/DCReport.pdf>

feedback from exhibitions of this work has been strong and positive, supporting my objectives of making a contribution through art in a time of declining religious practice and faith, and, through exhibition of this work, of assisting others to more clearly review their own beliefs.

In the context of this current investigative study, in order to find a manageable theoretical and practical framework, I have chosen to focus my attention on just one aspect of my Catholic faith: the Catholic belief in miracles. This belief is, from my perspective, centred about two key areas of Catholic theology: (i) the mystery of the Catholic Mass, and (ii) the Cult of the Saints.

First, Catholics are taught that in the Mass the last supper of Christ and His Apostles is re-enacted. The priest says a formula of words over the ‘host’, which is a wafer of bread, and over the cup of wine. Through holy intervention, these human foods are, we believe, ‘trans-substantiated’, which means they are changed from worldly bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.⁵ This miraculous intervention, which is not evident to the viewer, calls on a Catholic’s faith for belief in the miracle. My artwork endeavours to explore this mystery through the creation of key vessels used in this part of the Mass. These are the chalice, the ciborium, the paten (or plate), and the tabernacle.

Second, the veneration or ‘Cult of Saints’ and the keeping of relics of the saints, is a practice that remained strong in the Church into the era of my childhood, but which has declined since the Second Vatican Council of the mid 1960s.⁶ The practice of praying to saints involves the belief that, through the intercession of the saint in

⁵ The theology of the Eucharist asserts that the words of the priest, at a point in the mass known as the consecration of the bread and wine, initiate a process whereby the substance of the bread and wine is trans-substantiated, or altered, into the actual substance of the body and blood of Jesus Christ, while retaining the physical characteristics of the original substances. This gives force to the Catholic belief that each Mass is a re-enactment of the last supper, where this action first occurred. It prefigures the sacrifice of Christ on the cross, that is the giving of His earthly body, and is not seen as just a memorial of the event. While many Catholics do not think of the consecration in this light the process of trans-substantiation is, nevertheless, believed to be miraculous.

⁶ This practice is still very strong in European countries, such as Italy and Spain, where bones and cloth relics from the bodies and personal possessions of persons declared by the church to be saints, are kept and venerated. Catholics seek God’s help through the saint whom they venerate. They do not worship saints or relics.

Heaven, God will intervene in human affairs and, for a supplicant of goodness and strong faith, may perform a miracle that answers the prayer made. In order to be proclaimed by the church as a saint it is required that two miraculous events, received after prayer to the saint, must have been recorded, investigated and proven to be scientifically inexplicable by any means other than supernatural intervention. The number of saints is large, meaning a very long record of proclaimed miracles over the life of the Christian faith.

The European practice of keeping saints' relics in precious vessels and venerating these artefacts has evoked my special interest in this aspect of religious life. The unique vessels used in this practice have inspired me to make these containers, known collectively as 'reliquaries', the focus of my art practice. In the section below, I will expand on this fascination with reliquaries, and show how I have investigated their physical form in an attempt to contribute to the sense of mystery that they contain.

The Cult of Saints as a source of inspiration

The drinking of 'blood' and the storing of bone fragments by the Christian faithful appear to a modern Westerner as macabre and superstitious practices, and it is their strange nature that moved me to examine them in my art. The art work is about my acceptance of miracles as real events, and acceptance of the many mysteries that arise through a belief in God and a formal practice of these beliefs. To foster my art work, I have explored recorded aspects of the history of the church, and have been fascinated by the life of the early Christians, especially in the Byzantine and Medieval periods. Many of the vessels and church artefacts that I have seen in this study have caught my attention and often stimulated my creative impulses.

The tabernacles, chalices and other liturgical vessels and reliquaries used in the early and medieval eras were ornate, highly decorated and made of precious metals. Some early wooden vessels were coated with metal sheaths, whilst other examples are made of ivory. Often, they were adorned with precious stones, always seeking to express a great reverence for the contents of the vessel (Figures 1, 2, 3 and 9). The forms of

these objects, together with the impression created by their surface finishes, were the elements that I wished to integrate in my work to capture the spirit of the times in which they originated, and the spirit of faith of those who fashioned them.

Writers who study this period speak of a belief, and an intensity of faith, that is uncommon to us in the modern era,⁷ and it was this ‘intensity’ that also caught my attention. The early Christians saw their faith as the driving force in their lives and as a principal influence for their daily activities. The many stories of the lives of saints and martyrs, which include miraculous events and cruel martyrdoms, have always been of interest, and have helped to form my current conceptions of these events. Equally important has been the exploration of my own ‘willingness to believe’ in the Cult of the Saints and to accept unquestioningly the core mystery of the Mass. By returning to the roots of my Christian beliefs, that is, the first few hundred years in which the content of Catholic faith was moulded and formed, I felt that I could examine my own beliefs and verify for myself that *I am currently unwilling to disallow belief*.

It is my conjecture that it is this ‘disallowance of belief’ that has grown in the minds of so many of my contemporaries that provides a catalyst for the growing disinterest in matters religious, and consequently challenging their faith in God. Following the age of enlightenment we have experienced the age of science, with great leaps of understanding in our universal structures, our macrocosm and microcosms. The age of science brings with it an inherent demand for proof, facts and irrefutable evidence that disallow any belief that does not have these requirements. In the body of artwork created for this project I seek to, at least, engage with this disallowance, and to create a vehicle for allowing reflection about another time and place where the depth of the faith and the intensity of belief was not a cause for questioning, but rather a given part of daily existence.

In reflecting on the creative process that has led me to this point in the development of my work, I recall Simon Schama’s ideas, where he referred to the researches of the

⁷ Safran, L. ed. “Heaven on Earth”, 1991.

historian /artist, as ‘discovering bits and pieces of a cultural design that seem to elude coherent reconstitution but which leads him deeper into the past’.⁸

This has been my experience, whether real or allegorical, and this is the experience that I seek for viewers of my art.

Schama, in the structuring of his book *Landscape and Memory*, presents historical research as:

an excavation, beginning with the familiar, digging down through layers of memories and representations toward the primary bedrock, laid down centuries or even millennia ago, and then working up again toward the light of contemporary recognition.⁹

This, too, reflects my experience in this study, seeking answers to the questions that sit, somewhat uncomfortably, in the front of my mind, and, I am convinced, in the minds of many Catholics in today’s society. Simply summarised, the issues which I have raised in this first chapter fit neatly into the question “Why do Catholics believe in miracles?” In my use of the reliquary form and church vessels to explore this question, I have asked myself “Can the Reliquary and Chalice help to illuminate the core mysteries of the Faith, such as the belief in miracles?”

My initial artworks took the form of the lidded box, which was the most common form of container used by churches to house the remains of the saints. The Reliquaries shown in Figures 1 – 3 are good examples of beautiful, ornate boxes from around the years 900 AD to 1200 AD. The stored relics may be actual bones, or fragments of bones, or bits of clothing or other possessions of the person nominated as a saint by the church. The form of the reliquary was often decided by the purpose to which the relics were to be put. For example the particular church community keeping the relics of the patron saint of their church may wish to display the relic, or carry it in procession on the anniversary of the saint’s death, their ‘feast day’ (Figure 5). The reliquary casket chosen might be in the form of the relic itself, for example an arm or foot (Figure 2), or it might be a glass sided container for ease of display (Figure 4).

⁸ Schama, “Landscape and Memory”, 1995, p. 16.

⁹ Ibid.

With these examples in mind, the production of a variety of the lidded box reliquaries and liturgical vessels continued in my studio, with experimentation on size and surface finish. The lidded box form allows for a sense of the mystery contained within the artwork to be preserved, as the contents naturally remain hidden from sight (Figure 6). The human touch of a hand on the lid however, allows the mystery to be revealed as the lid is removed.

Studio practice as knowledge creation

Following the initial production of a range of objects, a significant shift in my understanding took place. I believe that this was stimulated by the library research on the subjects of epistemology, theoretical frameworks and the understanding of the purpose and practice of postgraduate study for artists. In my presentation of studio research in Chapter three, this shift is detailed. However, some discussion on my conception of studio practice as research will help to clarify the framing of ideas in the writing ahead.

I have found in my study of ceramic artists over recent years¹⁰, as well as in literature generally, that art can be useful in helping individuals to explore inner thoughts, emotions, anxieties and beliefs. Often the ideas which are realised in the artwork may proceed into, or inform the work in a way not completely clear to the individual's consciousness, and therefore not able to be fully or immediately expressed by the person in a clear and coherent manner. It was an invaluable experience to become aware that the artist is involved in the process of knowledge creation through the thoughtful production of artwork. Further, the process of exegesis, the drawing out of the meaning of that knowledge in the work, may begin in the experiences of a life that forms the idea for the artwork, and continue well beyond the process of making, and the completion, of a work.¹¹

¹⁰ Adrian Saxe, an American ceramic artist, and Alan Peascod from Australia are two potters who have been influential in my development.

¹¹ See Sullivan, Graeme, 2005 pp. 48-9, 98.

It is also common to find an artist referring to their work as a ‘journey of discovery’, or a discovery of their inner self, their lost past, their unconscious reality. However trite this may seem, there is, in my opinion, an element of truth in the statement that applies to most artists, and I will adopt this practice here. My experience of ceramic art over the last six years has been one of discovery of a life force in the creation of my work; one of transition from the traditional making of domestic vessels to the making of ‘vessels for miracles’, which is how I now regard the sculptural pieces that have been inspired by my study of the history of church art and its treasury of images of sacred vessels.

Traditional Catholic beliefs include the mysterious and supernatural, events which are presented, in a way, as commonplace by this belief system. In evaluating my beliefs the ‘burning questions’ are those asked by my pieces, with the reliquary testing the truth or myth surrounding the reverence for the miraculous remains of the saints stored in these vessels. In this sense, the ciborium, the chalice and the paten, which are the vessels used in the daily routine of the Catholic Mass, explore, in their making, the mystery of the Mass, when, as Catholics believe, simple bread and wine are transubstantiated into the Body and Blood of Christ (Figures 7, 8 and 9).

The veneration of relics is not confined to Christianity but is also important, for example, to Hindus and Buddhists. Ornate reliquaries have been excavated from Buddhist temple sites, and are said to have contained the physical remains of the Buddha and other great Buddhist teachers (Figure 10). Indeed, it has been suggested that “The tradition is that when the spiritually pure Buddhist master is cremated, his remains can include not only bone fragments but tiny pearl-like beads, called ‘ringsel’, which are believed to emit spiritual power and even to multiply.”¹² The reliquaries are used by monks in blessing ceremonies and are held in high esteem by the faithful.

¹² Religion & Ethics newsweekly, sourced from <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/week711/feature.html> (17 July 2007.)

I was able to view the Muslim relics of the hair of Mohammed in the Topkapi Palace in Istanbul in 2006. It was also interesting to note, on my visit to the museum at Anzac Cove in Turkey in 2006, that skull and bone fragments were stored in a display case with the inscription declaring them to be ‘the skull of a martyr’ and thus making the display case a form of modern reliquary (Figure 11). It is from these widely gathered examples that I am led to surmise that there appears to be a need, common to people across faiths, to maintain tangible links with important figures from the past who are believed to retain a special relationship with God.

The Christian belief in the power of relics developed with the growth of the faith, supported by statements in the New Testament of ‘the healing power of objects that were touched by Christ or His apostles.’¹³ For the Christian, the theology of life after death and the resurrection of the body after final judgement underpin the belief that the dead saint has a special place in heaven from which to intercede with God on behalf of the living.¹⁴ The practice of intercession to the saints was still very strong in Australia in the 1950s and ’60s, in the church of my youth, and has left a lasting impression in my memory. These fragments of memory are reflected in the church vessels and reliquaries that I make.

To give substance to the metaphor of investigative journey, this study involves a literary journey back to the early Christian era, physical travel to the lands of the early Byzantine Empire in Italy and Turkey in 2006, and the journey of making artwork and developing understandings over the time period of this project. These three aspects became inextricably entwined in the finished product.

¹³ Department of Medieval Art and the Cloisters. “Relics and Reliquaries in Medieval Christianity”. In *Time line of Art History*. New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000 -. http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/relic/hd_relic.htm (October2001)

¹⁴ Ibid for reference to this. In summary of this article of faith Catholics believe that each person has a soul, a spiritual component of their makeup, which leaves the body on death and exists in that mysterious place, Heaven (or Hell). It is believed that the spirit has access in some way to intercede with God in Heaven on behalf of loved ones on Earth, and perhaps, to bring about some benefit on behalf of those living.

Is all religion superstition?

Finally I must explore, for my own satisfaction, the question raised earlier when I spoke of those today who see the practices of worshippers who attend church as akin to superstition. Indeed, I have read articles and letters to newspaper columns that call all religion superstition, and such a charge is not lightly made, nor ignored. To begin to appreciate the grounds for this perspective, and its possible refutation, it is important to appreciate the early gestation of the Christian church.

Historically, Christianity supplanted many pagan rituals as a new system of belief. Because these pagan beliefs were a conglomerate of ancient myths and superstitions, their role as forerunner of modern religions leads naturally to the perspective of religion as superstition. As a consequence, in my reading I set myself the task of discovering if indeed the transition from paganism to Christianity might have carried with it evidence of practices and beliefs that could give some tenable foundation to this view. For the purposes of this investigation, this was deemed a critical step for the provision of a sound basis on which to lay a sensible claim for an unwillingness to disallow belief.

Research Methodology

The research is conducted from a qualitative and explorative stance appropriate to, and in common with, the study of both art and religion. I am guided by an epistemology of subjectivism required by the nature of artwork, which calls upon an intuitive response from myself as maker, and my viewers, who bring to it their own interpretation of its meaning. Hence the theoretical framework must be interpretative. The research method, being studio based inquiry, relies heavily on a hermeneutic perspective.

The research process can be described in terms of the ceramic artist's cycle of production, which involves the manipulation of clay by mechanical wheel process or hand forming. The work is then carefully dried, fired initially to 'bisque ware' stage, surface treatment and colouration is applied and a final, or glaze, firing of the finished

work takes place. Upon the opening of the kiln, the works reveal themselves to the maker and a dialogue begins as to the success of the piece in communicating meaning. This dialogue, as I have said above, continues beyond the first introduction to the finished piece. The notions of ‘understanding practices’ and ‘reflexive practices’ as described by Sullivan¹⁵ form part of the theoretical framework for conceptualising art practice as research, and fit well with my studio experience. These explain the experience of coming to new understandings through review of work made, and through the progress of the cycle of ceramic production. The clay forming, firing, finishing and re-firing cycle is repeated a number of times in the course of a semester, meaning that new work feeds on previous outcomes to allow growth of the concept and further development of ideas.

The literature review that follows explains the source of that intensity of faith that the early Christians exhibited. It examines the pagan and Christian religions to demonstrate that they were not collections of myth and superstition, but were strong systems of religious belief, well supported by the rulers of the communities of the time, by extensive networks of art and architecture, as well as by written tradition. It also looks at the work of contemporary ceramic artists who share my dilemmas of faith and who express them in their work.

¹⁵ Sullivan, 2001

Chapter Two Viewing Christianity as an assured faith

Some aspects of early Christian belief

One who has an interest in religion and art cannot but be fascinated by the Byzantine era. The relationship between religion and art in Byzantium (this word is used by authors to describe the region later known as the Byzantine Empire) is said to have been "... a highly charged interaction."¹⁶ An important contribution in this regard is Safran's *Heaven On Earth, Art and the Church in Byzantium*. This work brings together a series of lectures on the Byzantine era that leave the reader with a deep impression of a time and place of intense belief and practice among the, then, new Christians. The faithful appear to have been so profoundly influenced by their new beliefs that they lived their theology in their daily lives and celebrated it in total absorption in their liturgies.

'Byzantion' was the name of a small town at the entrance to the Black Sea that was chosen by Constantine, in the third century A D, as the site from which to build the new Roman Empire. He successfully attacked Rome to wrest power from the emperor, an impressive feat, completed, we are told, with the help of the new Christian God. Constantine called his new city Constantinople New Rome, now known as Istanbul. His experience in battle led to his conversion to Christianity and, more importantly, to his adoption of Christianity as the new state religion around the year 313 A D. It was a vision of Christ requesting him to adopt the symbol of the cross as his battle standard that had given him and his soldiers courage in this conflict. It was therefore, declared Constantine, a matter of state security that Christ be adopted as the God of the new state. To Western historians the great civilization and empire that grew out into Asia Minor over the next millennium became known as the Byzantine Empire, with its distinctive style of religious orthodoxy, art and trade.¹⁷

¹⁶ Safran, p. 2

¹⁷ Alchermes, Joseph. "Constantinople and the Empire of New Rome", in *Heaven On Earth*, p. 15

What Christianity now enjoyed was akin to state sponsorship, and so began a period of development of this fledgling sect into a religious community with vast investment in architecture, art, and theological orthodoxy.¹⁸ Safran, editor of *Heaven on Earth*, and her list of authors present a faith with a number of significant characteristics. Firstly, its development was not sudden or rapid. From the time of Christ, through the Constantinian period and beyond, its theology was hammered out by a process of solid debate which was endorsed periodically as part of the ‘one, true, Catholic and Apostolic faith’, at various church Ecumenical Councils. These were gatherings of the Pope, bishops, priests, lay theologians and influential political figures. The first two to three centuries of theological development focused on the nature of the relationship of Jesus Christ to God the Father, and also on the relationship of mankind to God.

God was defined as being three persons in one nature, the Trinity: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. The principal elements of this doctrine were established at the Council of Nicea in 325 A D, and are still recited in almost the same form by Catholics at Masses today, as the Nicene Creed.¹⁹ “The Byzantines saw theology as the safeguarding of a sacred mystery, whose content is the union of God and man in Christ.”²⁰ A critical further aspect of this relationship is that “...the aim of Byzantine worship was *theosis*, the actual deification or divinisation of humanity...’.²¹ Perl gives a quite good explanation of the Christian line of thinking behind this difficult proposition. These theological principles were argued about, and the detailed understanding of their many complexities developed over a great period of time; written down, added to, and structured in a logical and rational fashion by early theologians. The Christology alone was a subject of deliberation for nine centuries.²² This theology emboldened the people of the time to become Christ-like; to follow His example in life, in the hope of enjoying eternity with Him in Heaven, as saints.

¹⁸ By ‘orthodoxy’ I mean here the establishment over time of the fundamental theological structures of the church, that which the ‘Fathers’, or bishops and theologians, presented as ‘the truth’.

¹⁹ See Appendix.

²⁰ Perl, Eric. D. “... That Man Might Become God”: Central themes in Byzantine Theology. In *Heaven on Earth*, p. 40.

²¹ Safran, p. 4.

²² Ibid. Christology is the study of every aspect of the life and nature of Jesus Christ.

The importance of art in the expression of belief

Safran's second point is that the significance of architecture and art cannot be overstated in relation to Byzantine beliefs and practices. Church architects throughout history have sought to express in their buildings something of the divine, employing massive height and ingenious structural engineering techniques that have produced edifices that almost defy gravity. Best known of the early Christian churches is the cathedral of Sancta Sophia, or Holy Wisdom, in Constantinople, built in the sixth century by the Emperor Justinian.²³ As part of this investigative journey I stood in this massive church, now a museum, and experienced the sense of awe and wonder that it inspires. While much of the original mosaic and fresco decoration of the church was destroyed when it became a mosque after the Muslim conquest, the remaining fragments nevertheless serve as a cryptic representation of the glory of the original era. Another of Justinian's creations is the church of San Vitale in Ravenna, Italy. Here the mosaics from the sixth century remain intact and their beauty is simply stupendous.

To the Byzantine mind, when an artist depicted a person or event or a story from the scriptures, he did not merely create a representation but actually brought into existence for the viewer that person or event. So powerful was the notion of image that the faithful were able to believe that Christ, or a particular saint or martyr depicted, was actually present with them (Figure 12). Referring to the most recognizable Byzantine art form, the icon, Perl says "An image is an image precisely because it bears its archetype in itself so that the Byzantine icon is not merely a picture but a 'power'."²⁴ (I have been mindful of this expression as I have produced my own 'images', the three dimensional reliquaries and ciboria of my *Church and Faith Series*.) Moreover, when the artwork was used in a liturgical celebration, the event depicted became present for those celebrating. This was especially true of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ which, Catholics believe, was, and is, re-enacted at each Catholic Mass as the Eucharistic liturgy. Perl observes that "...one of

²³ Rice, David Talbot, "Art of the Byzantine Era". 1963, p. 47.

²⁴ Perl, p. 48.

the most frequent words in Byzantine hymns is ‘today’.” This reflects their notion that the event celebrated is happening ‘now’ in their liturgy. The church architecture, adornments and furnishings are equally important because they are the site for these events which are manifesting themselves into human history.²⁵

Belief as seen by the Roman viewer of religious art

The book *Heaven On Earth* presents, through its essays, a developing theology that is accepted by its followers in an intensely personal expression of their belief about God’s relationship with them. It presents its facts convincingly, but speaks of the era in an idealized fashion and from a single perspective. However, the book by Jaś Elsner, titled *Art and the Roman Viewer: The transformation of art from the pagan world to Christianity*, seeks to present this subject from inside the mind of a person present at the time. This interesting research, the result of a doctoral study, takes us further along the pathway to answering questions about these Byzantine beliefs and from where they might have come. He begins with the statement that “...almost everything in Christian art (indeed in Christian culture) is the direct descendant of elements, attitudes and forms present for centuries in classical civilization.”²⁶

With Elsner we look at religion through art. He takes as his starting point the more traditional view of art historians that the Roman ideal is perfection of naturalistic representation, seeking to make the representation as real as that which inspired it. From this tradition came the beautiful sculpted forms that we now associate with Greece and Rome; statues of the gods, goddesses and heroes, and friezes of events of war and of religious rites. From this beginning, however, the art of the Byzantine era changed quite quickly to a more abstracted and less realistic style.

Elsner confronts the common view that the change from an ‘ideal’ representation corrupted and diminished the art in the process, and he presents the view that the changes represented an essential requirement of a new way of expressing substantively different religious realities. His study considers the art of the first six centuries after Christ, using specific sites as examples, interpreting how the viewer of

²⁵ Perl, p. 53.

²⁶ Elsner, Jaś. “Art and the Roman Viewer”. 1995, p. 7.

the time would have read the work. While recognizing significant changes in belief as the new Christian religion became the state religion he nevertheless shows that the perspective of the viewer, their 'modus putandi', has not changed. The pagan visitor to the temple would have prayed, reacted to the sacred images and viewed their god in much the same way as the Christians of the following era. He sums up his delivery of the evidence by concluding:

Criticism has seen the transformation of Roman art as a formal and stylistic change, a decline in naturalism. What has been missed is an evolution in content – a simplification and clarification from the conceptual instability of a human being as god to the logical (and anthropological) stability of a human being as mediator with God.²⁷

He is referring to Christ as the new mediator with the Father on behalf of human beings, one of which He, Himself, has become. He further exegetes religious implications from the art, "The Christian context is God becoming man in order to reveal himself. The Roman view is man (emperor) becoming god to glorify himself."²⁸

Elsner views the art of the new era as a shift in emphasis that was consistent with the new theology, and that saw content as the critical factor. "Art was called on not to evoke a particular person (as the naturalism of Classical art had been) but an abstract relationship, a specific place within the hierarchy."²⁹ He gives the example of the use of the lamb or sheep as symbol. In Roman art the bas-relief sculpture of a sheep in a wall piece will signify sheep as a sacrificial animal only. In Christian art the use of the sheep signified Christ, and carried with it a range of abstracted significations such as 'willing sacrifice', 'a gentle and innocent sufferer', and even reference to the role of shepherd of His own flock³⁰ (Figure 13). Elsner goes further, claiming "What has changed is not the sacrificial iconography of religion, but the meanings and understandings of that iconography for the viewers within a different religious

²⁷ Elsner, p. 188

²⁸ Ibid p. 176

²⁹ Ibid p. 189

³⁰ Ibid

system.”³¹ For Elsner, using the words of Richard Hooker, a 16th century theologian, the artistic change evident in the transition from the classical Roman to the Christian era was from “...a ‘literal’ to a ‘metaphorical’ use.” and was not only religious but “...also a cultural change in ways of assimilating, interpreting and viewing the world.”³² These concepts hold particular interest for me as I see my own work, and my expectations for my viewers, following this same pathway. Through the application of abstracted significations I seek to offer an iconography that will allow for the viewer of my work to bring their own interpretation and world view to bear in ‘reading’ my art.

Elsner, in the above quote, further departs from authors on this subject and recognizes paganism as a religious system rather than an eclectic collection of myths and related practices. I consider this important to my argument. What took place in this long period of transition from paganism to Christianity was a change by some of the people of a particular geographical area from one religion to a new religion. In the process of such a change the everyday lives and experiences of these people are lived as ordinary people of the time lived, but now with a new motivation and a new paradigm about life, both in this world and after death.

The Roman word *superstitio* meant ‘excessive fear of the gods’,³³ and is not so different from our own definition of the word. There can be no doubt that superstition existed among the peoples of the first century, just as there can be no doubt that superstition was rife among the Catholics of the Reformation era. What the authors on this subject are clear about when they discuss the transition from paganism to Christianity is that what we are discussing are religious systems, not systems of superstition. Christians coined the word *pagani*, which appeared early in the fourth century, meaning either a civilian or a rustic,³⁴ not, as we now represent pagans, a people steeped in superstition.

³¹ Elsner, p. 191

³² Ibid, p. 157

³³ Fox, Robin Lane. “*Pagans And Christians*”. 1986, p. 34

³⁴ Ibid, p. 30

Fox also confirms that the people who began to follow the Christian faith adapted many religious practices of their common experience and allowed them to assume a new significance within the liturgical practice of their new religion. In the discussion below some examples will be presented to illustrate the similarities and differences between the intentions and practices of the two religious systems.

First, there is the commonality of ‘pilgrimage’, to sites close or distant, as a way of seeking to identify more closely with the important personages and sites of the faith. Both systems are aware of a sense of ‘place’, and both reference this to the known writings of their culture to link place with the holy personages.³⁵ (I was inspired by stories of pilgrimage to make a series of ‘pilgrim flasks’, the nature of which will be detailed in Chapter Three.)

Second, Elsner speaks of the context for the origins of Christianity as the Jewish culture³⁶ and writes of the centrality to the Christian way of thought of a single scripture, as opposed to the many mythical stories of the pagan culture. He suggests that “This single and consistent source was significant in shaping the beliefs of those initiated into the new religion as a united body committed to a single, albeit developing, set of ‘truths’ that shaped and united the secular and religious aspects of everyday life.”³⁷ He further notes that “Whereas Roman state religion begins with myth-historical events and makes them sacred, Christianity begins with Faith and finds it enacted in history.”³⁸ It is in collecting and selecting writings to form The Bible that the church first introduces the concept of miracles and their importance to the Christian tradition.

Another commonality that Elsner explores in some detail is the significance in the Roman pagan cult, and in Christianity, of the sacrificial procession. In a detailed examination of the *Ara Pacis*, an altar-temple dedicated to Augustus in Rome, he analyses the sacrificial processional friezes carved in the walls of the sacred space. He then analyses the mosaic walls of the church of Saint Apollonare Nuovo at Ravenna,

³⁵ Elsner p. 153

³⁶ Fox p. 7

³⁷ Elsner p. 153

³⁸ Ibid p. 178

an Eastern centre of Byzantine rule in Italy. The art works all have the aim of signifying the importance of the procession and the sacrificial act. They all present these in their relationship to the god, but each underlines, in Elsner's study of the works from a viewer's standpoint, the difference in the way the viewer's theological understanding was developed by the experience of viewing. The development of content is "... more fundamental than a change in the meaning of images." It is "...a difference above all of increasing symbolism and exegesis ..." and "...indicates a difference in the ideology, in the conception, of sacrifice 'actually' enacted by the members of the different cults..." explored.³⁹ I was able to stand and marvel at the frieze in the church of St. Apollonare Nuovo in Ravenna, Italy, in 2006. The mosaics were unlike anything I had seen before and are truly beautiful (Figures 14 and 15).

This discussion of content and meaning in art has been significant for me in relating to, and understanding, my own work. In seeking forms and surfaces that give the viewer a sense of antiquity, of the degradation of history, I am using a form of abstraction and symbolism to help the viewer to a new meaning in the reliquary or liturgical vessel. It is worth noting that procession remains important in Christian liturgy to this day, and, especially in Europe, is used, in conjunction with reliquaries, in the celebration of the Cult of Saints.

Peter Brown titles his book *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*. In presenting his research Brown pays some attention to practices surrounding the way that pagans and Christians dealt with death and the dead, and continues to be critical of modern historians who make no effort to place themselves in the shoes of the ancients, but who review history from a modern moral standpoint. Brown's own view is that the practices of pagan and Christian alike were a "common response to the human condition".⁴⁰ Christians differed in their belief that the dead would gain new life in 'heaven', and, as the Nicene Creed confirms for the Christian, "We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come."⁴¹ This belief was a powerful incentive, for many pagans longed for a greater level of 'hope' than their pagan gods could give them.

³⁹ Elsner, p. 240 Italics his.

⁴⁰ Brown, "*The Cult of the Saints-Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*," p. 20

⁴¹ See Appendix, "The Nicene Creed".

The Catholic religion and the Cult of Saints as subject for contemporary ceramic sculpture,

A number of ceramic artists have used their work to reflect on their difficulty dealing with their Catholic origins. Ron Kovatch, for example, is an American ceramist whose work refers back to his childhood experience of religion (Figure 16). The reviewer of an exhibition of his work from the early nineties writes “Though Kovatch’s early struggle with Catholicism is clearly the dominant theme in these works, one does not sense an overbearing self-consciousness or myopic view of the world.”⁴² Reviewer Madonick goes on to say that “Kovatch, it seems, offers his own heart to us on these shrines, which are assertions of intellectual doubt and aesthetic strength.”⁴³ These are qualities common to the ideal that I aspire to in making work of this genre. Finally he provides a further insight that again strikes home when he notes “The shrine as an entity takes on a frailness that begins to evidence Kovatch’s own faith – one that rises from doubt, a faith in human frailty ...”⁴⁴ These are the very messages that my research endeavours to find and express in form and finish. In another article on Kovatch, reviewer Cherie Fister adds further insight to the artist’s achievements. Fister says “However varied the sources of Ron Kovatch’s reliquaries, his affinity for the colours and symbols of the Church are striking – bright golds and enamelled red clothe chalices, tabernacles, and altars.”⁴⁵ There is nothing new under the sun, but it is somehow pleasing to find such a close commonality of sculptural form, theme and expression in another artist’s work. Feedback on the achievement of the expression sought is also important, and Fister affirms Kovatch’s achievement here when speaking of a shrine form, suggesting “It is an image that urges this writer to believe that she somehow remembers these shrines. Certainly the mystery of gold and incense is recalled, as is an early memory of meeting a power separate from oneself.”⁴⁶

⁴² Madonick, “Ron Kovatch”, p. 32

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Fister, “Ron Kovatch”, p. 50

⁴⁶ Ibid, p. 51

Another ceramist who inspires the search for an “antique look” in vessels that have religious significance is Laurent Craste, whose installations, according to Beaudet “...sometimes look like altars set for a Eucharistic celebration and which, in turn, make a direct reference to the Roman Catholic religion.” Craste’s work refers to objects such as relics, chalices, communion hosts, and to processes such as transubstantiation⁴⁷ (Figure 17), likening this mutation of the bread and wine at Mass to the change in clay from the malleable raw material, through the forming and drying process, to the final dramatic changes, wrought by intense heat, to stone. Through these final stages the artistic creation retains and confirms its form while altering its substance from clay to stone. This is a charged metaphor, lacking only the supernatural to complete a parallel. Perhaps this, too, is there if one allows the belief in the hand of God in the eternal creation of substance. Craste’s work is of particular interest to me because he, too, in his creativity has “An attraction to mystery...”.⁴⁸

The critic of Craste’s work alerts us to references to Greek mythology in some of the forms seen in the exhibition. She writes, however, a relevant warning to artists. “If the artist uses ancient forms, he transforms them; repeating past forms does not gain added value unless they are reinterpreted, unless another stratum of meaning is added.”⁴⁹ Recalling to mind the words of Simon Schama, quoted earlier, Beaudet confirms the intention in my own work. She writes “Craste’s thought process is not a nostalgic call to the past, but a meditation that uses the past to get better momentum in the present.”⁵⁰

A last, important, contemporary reference to the work of the ceramic sculptor is the article entitled “Against Dichotomy, Dennis Smith’s Conversations in Clay”. I want to emphasize both the value of the conversation in developing meaning in artworks, and the importance to ceramic artists of the versatility and purpose of the clay medium. Again Schama is brought to mind in LaVilla-Havelin’s words about Smith’s ceramic art:

⁴⁷ Eaudet, “Metamorphoses & Invention”, p. 59

⁴⁸ Ibid, p. 60

⁴⁹ Ibid p. 61

⁵⁰ Ibid.

... his work rises from a human landscape of traditions and cultures overlaying, coexisting, bilingual, torn in allegiances, separated by claim to land, heritage and religion. But even here, in the human conversation, dichotomies serve only to drive wedges where art-making's conversation with materials and objects can perhaps raise questions, create spaces for dialogues.⁵¹

It is the raising of questions through the viewer's dialogue with the work that is the intention and hope of these creative works. It is imperative, however, that substantial dialogue take place before the work leaves the studio, and that the artist, concluding a conversation with each piece, is able to release it from the studio for public critique. This is the learning process of studio research, the creation of knowledge in the artist by the work, and the development in the mind of the artist of new awareness of intent in its creation. Like Smith in *Dear Christ, Please Water My Lawn, no. 2. Watching the Grass Grow Series, 2001* (Figure 18), I feel "...a self-conscious confusion with the rules," and recall a question posed by "...Milagros: Do they work, if we are not sure if we believe?"⁵²

Central to this literature review has been the examination of writings about art in order to draw conclusions about religion and religious meaning. This is not inappropriate in a thesis about artworks with religious content, for it does remind one that religion, in its many forms, has been a principal source of artistic inspiration from the primitive eras onward. The spiritual needs of people and the religious needs of systems have been catered for by artists over the millennia. Many significant artworks of the era following Christ were the result of commissioning by the ruling power, or the Church and its wealthy patrons. This is true of Christian and non-Christian traditions, Eastern and Western. In the modern era, however, the 19th and 20th centuries, as art commissions have become the exception rather than the rule, artists' responses to spiritual and religious issues have changed.

⁵¹ LaVilla-Havelin, "Against Dichotomy-Denis Smith's conversations in clay", p. 90
⁵² Ibid, p. 91. *Milagros* is Spanish for miracle.

In a major exhibition of art in Melbourne in 1998, Rosemary Crumlin drew together artists of the twentieth century in an eclectic mix of artwork unlikely to have ever been brought together before this event. In her accompanying catalogue of the same title as the exhibition, *Beyond Belief – Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*, she recognises the significance of religion as a force in the artistic creativity of many early periods of art and its prevalence throughout even later history as a subject for many artists. Crumlin indicates that religious art may have seemed lost in the 18th and 19th centuries, but she argues that it was there, only in a different form from that expected. The Director of the National Gallery of Victoria notes in his Director's Foreword to the catalogue that in the 20th century religion is seen in art quite differently to the way it was depicted in, say, the period of the Renaissance:

...the religious dimension is altogether more subtle and inevitably more personal. From images created with a clear public message in mind, we move into a world of individual spiritual discovery, personal visual languages and images which seek to explore and evoke rather than to define and prescribe. Some artists employ familiar religious iconography as convenient signifiers of an earlier culture and mindset – artefacts to be used in a quintessentially modern image-making of juxtaposition, anomaly and incongruity.⁵³

In seeking to understand my own art as 'religious', I have found this exposition very helpful. It has clarified for me my role and the viewer's role in relation to the artwork, and helped me feel more comfortable in the methodology and outcomes of my work. This view also allows us to more easily locate, as having religious content, the recent work of the ceramic artists described above.

With this in mind the next chapter describes the investigative journey in the studio. This was indeed a journey as I moved, quite clearly, from one position of understanding to a completely different perspective, as seen in the progressive change in the work produced. The studio research was interrupted by a physical journey of

⁵³ Crumlin, Rosemary. Ed. "*Beyond Belief – Modern Art and the Religious Imagination*" p. 6

six weeks travel to the lands of the old Byzantine Empire, Italy and Turkey, to visit Rome, Ravenna, Constantinople and many historical sites. Many churches and museums were visited, and many reliquaries were seen. Their influence is felt in the work that resumed on my return to the studio.

Chapter Three Making Vessels for Miracles

The nature of reliquaries and liturgical vessels

The reliquary is not a vessel commonly seen in Australian Catholic churches, and it is only relatively lately that I have discovered this fascinating aspect of the Cult of Saints. Images of a number of beautiful reliquary boxes are available in books and on the Internet, and I have recently been able to view others in galleries and museums in Europe. Further searching on the Internet has revealed some macabre but interesting hand, foot and arm reliquaries, especially made to hold the longer bones from these body parts (Figures 1, 2 and 3) and it is the stylized form and embedded symbolism of these historical pieces that has provided a catalyst for the making of the collection in this investigation.

It seems that it is partly because of the short history of the Australian church that we do not have a tradition of saints or martyrs and, therefore, we have no collection of relics such as seen in most European churches. Relics are, however, kept in Australian Cathedrals and in fact, can be found attached to, or embedded in, the ‘altar stone’, which is a special part of each altar. However, because these are not readily visible to the congregation, the relic is not a factor that has traditionally affected the thinking of Australian Catholics.

Nevertheless, reflecting on the more mysterious aspects of belief that the celebration of the Mass and the Cult of the Saints entail, particularly for those worshippers who have been brought up with a tradition of visible artefacts, an appreciation can be developed of the extent to which these demand the deep faith of the believer. As discussed in an earlier chapter, my readings on the early Byzantine Christians demonstrated that in these people was to be found an extraordinary depth of faith, which affected every aspect of their daily existence. They had little trouble accepting these mysteries because they were surrounded by equally mysterious aspects of the physical world, of the seasons, of death and of life. The extent of such faith certainly

appears strange to modern Western minds, a fact that has been commented on by a number of authors.⁵⁴

My travel, taken in the course of the investigations during September-October, 2006, to the modern parts of the original Byzantine Empire revealed, in both Italy and Turkey, continued evidence of the glory of that era, and the extent to which the Cult of Saints had, and still has, a strong influence on Christian life in that region.

As a consequence of these thoughts and experiences I began, in the studio, to explore my reaction to the contrast that I saw in the depth of faith of the early Christians and the modern experience of faith crisis among Western Christians, myself and my doubts prominent among them.

The studio investigation started with the making of reliquary forms as lidded boxes, liturgical vessels and tabernacles. These liturgical vessels included chalices, paten and candlesticks. Tabernacles are generally ornate metal, wood or stone cabinet-like containers built into the altar of the Catholic Church in which the consecrated host is placed after communion. In the Eastern Rite churches of the Catholic faith the tabernacle often has a small platform on which can be placed a reliquary or other devotional object, during the service. It has been the more exotic appearance of these Eastern structures that has more strongly appealed to my aesthetic taste, and as a consequence the tabernacles in this collection have been modelled on them (Figures 7, 8, 9 and 19).

Some causal factors

It is important here to reflect briefly on the causes of my uncertainty about the Catholic mysteries, since this was a significant factor behind the creative urge that underpinned this collection. I felt my disillusionment with the failing church hierarchical structure to be a major issue, because, I reasoned, if I have little faith in the church 'Fathers' of today can I sensibly trust the church 'Fathers' of history? This

⁵⁴ Safran, p. 1

uncertainty also manifested itself in my discomfort with the ‘over-pious’ attitudes evident in the devotion of some contemporary Catholics. For example, the artwork in the Catholic churches of my youth seemed to reflect these pious practices. A devotion to Mary, Mother of God, was reflected in reproductions of rather ‘sweet’ paintings, her traditional blue garments often having a garish tone that sapped both the strength and appeal of the image. The devotion to the Sacred Heart of Jesus depicted Him with His heart exposed, topped with fire, and in traditional red and blue garments. This is a difficult image for a young person to comprehend. The saints were also commonly depicted in over-pious form, in reproduction or in statue form, on the church walls. Whilst it is true that these depictions have largely disappeared from today’s churches, their impact is still felt in my reflections of this time, strongly affecting my attitude to the deeper mysteries to which they point.

Technical requirements of the research

This, then, was the starting point for the exploration of the reliquary form which I took to be a symbol of the deeper mystery of the source of miracles, and of the communion of saints in the life hereafter. In their construction I believe that the created forms must make reference to the extremes of ornate decoration on the reliquaries of old, and, in so doing, be able to take the viewer’s mind back in history. At the same time I wanted the works to have an aura about them that was suggestive of things ecclesiastical. In this regard, whilst the form of the piece could be made to reflect the forms of old, it is the immediate surface of the work that will have the most impact on the viewer. I believe that the clay medium lends itself particularly well to the outcomes that I was trying to achieve, because the surfaces of the work could take on the ornate feel required for a reliquary through appropriate manipulation of the soft clay body.

In preparation for the modelling work, I visited churches and the old Ballarat cemetery, in order to find suitable surface decorations that could be ‘appropriated’ (Figure 20) and used on the reliquaries. By pressing clay blocks into carvings on the walls of churches and surrounding wrought iron fences, I was able to make moulds of images that represented the symbolic forms that are characteristic of sacred vessels.

These moulds were fired to harden them and then used to impress the clay slabs prepared for the hand-making process. They could also be pressed into the sides of the wheel-thrown pieces. Because clay is a plastic and malleable material that will retain any surface impression given to it, it can be formed by hand or wheel work, into an almost endless variety of shapes. It has been important to me that the mouldings, which enhance the form of the work, have come from places associated with worship or religious ritual. These are able to trigger memory responses in the viewers of my work, bringing them to a better appreciation of my intent in creating the piece.

In order to provide a surface ‘reading’ like their ancient counterparts the reliquary forms that I was making needed surface finishes that could evoke a sense of the ecclesiastical, and a sense of age and mystery. In order to develop this conceptual and emotional response a variety of glaze and engobe treatments were tried. Engobes⁵⁵ and oxides⁵⁶ were used together over different clay bodies, in different firing conditions, in an attempt to find a surface that was able to engender this sense of antiquity; an aged look, with the abuses and accretions of time evident in the finished pieces (Figures 21, 22, and 23). For this work engobe recipes were obtained from studio supervisor Peter Pilven and also from the writings of British potter, John Chalke.⁵⁷

Different firing methods were available through the ceramics studio, and exceptional results were obtained, over time, using both gas and wood-fired kilns. As these methodologies require different clay bodies in order to gain a satisfactory response to the kiln conditions, a number of clays have also been tested. For the experimental potter the use of these varied materials and the observation and manipulation of their characteristics provide a wide range of possibilities. The use of a wood-fired kiln has special potentialities. It requires constant stoking with pine wood over a 72 hour period, and a team of potters work together to achieve the often unpredictable surface finishes available through this intensive process. The wood ash is a significant factor

⁵⁵ Engobes are similar to liquid clay, known as slip, but more complex. Different additives produce a range of effects on the fired surface of the clay, including crawling and peeling.

⁵⁶ Oxides are raw metallic powders that are used in glaze or engobe composition to add colour. Iron oxide, for example, provides a rust-like finish in some instances. See Figure 23.

⁵⁷ Chalke, “Amazing Glaze”, p. 33.

in the final surface finish achieved, because it is a glaze component that gives unique colour and texture. After considerable testing the desired surface finishes were achieved. Set firing conditions were developed, and, using glazes or engobes in combination with a number of different oxides the first pieces in the collection were assembled. The contrasting effects available through wood-firing can be seen in figures 24, 25 and 26.

These first reliquaries were lidded boxes or lidded ciboria⁵⁸ that, for me, were created to ‘contain the mystery’. Could there be contained unseen within the holy remains of one of God’s chosen saints? By means of the touch of human hand can the lid be lifted to reveal the mystery? The objective of this work is that my viewers might be able to see in the reliquary a “...digging down through layers of memories and representations...and then [a] working up again toward the light of [a] contemporary recognition.”⁵⁹ It is hoped that through such recognition they might reach into their personal store of memories and treasured thoughts, finding in the reliquary a secure place in which to deposit anew those beliefs that may be tenuously held but which they are unwilling to disallow. In this same way, I feel that these vessels have become my subconscious self, in which are stored my personal beliefs and faith, and which now act as receptacles for my certainties and uncertainties (Figure 26).

A significant paradigm shift

It was well into this period of production that an important ‘paradigm shift’ in my thinking was experienced that became critical to the development of a greater understanding of my work. This new understanding arose while reading about the notion of a theoretical framework of a research thesis and the development of art practice as research. Whilst I contemplated a finished piece recently taken from the pottery kiln there was an abrupt coming together of a number of ideas that acted to create a new vision for the work just completed. I found that after this time there

⁵⁸ A ciborium is a vessel used to hold the communion bread wafer that has been consecrated by the priest during a previous Mass. The ciborium is locked in the tabernacle between Masses, as the host is now viewed as the Body of Christ.

⁵⁹ Schama, p. 16.

began a new appreciation of the essential nature, in the research process, of the ongoing dialogue between the artist and the work produced. The particular piece that sparked the insight was a work that I had entitled “*Closed Reliquary with Three Crosses*”. It stood apart from the other completed reliquaries and tabernacles in that it was not lidded, and it was unable to be opened. The new, closed reliquary was different (Figure 27).

A period ensued in which there was a greater awareness of the nature and value of inter-subjective dialogue between myself and the art work, with a developed appreciation of the importance of this dialogue in the reading of meaning in art. I was now able to read my intent in making this piece, an understanding that was not available to me prior to my “insight”. I felt that I could now more clearly see that the work expressed the unknowable nature of mystery, and that full comprehension of some realities is, in fact, not possible in this life. The particular piece was made from a terracotta clay that gave a rich dark-grey finish when coated with iron oxide and fired to 1200°C, a very high temperature for an earthenware clay. By applying white slip over the bisqued clay I achieved a crackle, which was reminiscent of an antique finish. The overall look of the piece was soft and pleasing, the impressed design and the white, rubbed back finish producing a definite sense of antiquity. I was later to learn that the colouration matched that of 2,000 to 2,500 year old Byzantine coins, evoking in the coin collector a very real recognition of antiquity. The form was tall, reminding the viewer of the structure of a cathedral. The larger central cross is in the Celtic style, representing my Irish-Australian Catholic heritage. The two other crosses refer to the two thieves of the Gospel story who were crucified with Christ, and who represent, for me, humankind. To this day I regard this as my most significant work, and it is very satisfying that it is now in the collection of the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, Victoria.

This work marked a stage along my journey at which I was content with my exploration of the lidded vessels for the keeping of relics, and I was ready to move on to deeper issues. In Simon Schama's words I was ready to return to “...digging down through [more] layers” as I had now experienced the “...working up...toward the light

of contemporary recognition”⁶⁰ in relation to the body of work completed in the previous six months.

This level of discernment of the broader content of the artwork just completed was a surprising experience, initiated by the context of the literary research that accompanied my studio production. This provided creative impetus to allow the production of a number of significant artworks in the remainder of the research period. In the next cycle of production another significant change occurred. The press moulds ceased to be the major influence in surface decoration and I moved to using a piece of old timber with high wood grain exposure into which to press the clay slabs prior to constructing new pieces. This change led directly to the creation of church-like buildings which incorporated these board-impressed sides and roofs. “*Closed Reliquary #2, 2006, Church & Faith Series*” and “*Closed Reliquary #3, 2006, Church & Faith Series*” took the form of wayside shrines (Figure 28). These works were inspired from memories that I could not isolate, and the works revealed their meanings through post-production reflection. The timber-look finish I see as a reference to the old wayside country churches of my youth. They were simple weatherboard constructions built in a location that was easily reached by the rural dwellers, often remote with no other buildings nearby. For me they represent an encounter with God along the journey of life, as well as memories of a past era. “*Closed Reliquary #3*” is made from the prestigious Southern Ice Porcelain which gives a marble-like, white finish. There is an incongruity here between the supposed purpose of the little building and the very refined material of its construction.

In an earlier chapter I mentioned how the stories of the saints inhabited my youth and inspired my efforts to live well. As I further researched the topic of the Cult of Saints for this investigation I found that pagans and Christians shared a common desire for pilgrimage to their holy sites, close or distant, as a way of seeking to identify more closely with the important personages and sites of the faith. I have noted already the importance of ‘pilgrimage’, ‘place’ and ‘persons’ to the cult of remembrance. Pilgrims were known to use flasks to gather holy oils or water, or even sand, from the sites of martyrdoms, to take with them to keep them safe on their return journeys, and

⁶⁰ Schama, p. 16

to provide healing balms for those sick at home. At a site in Alexandria in Egypt, where Saint Menas was martyred, the monks made small terracotta flasks in which to put sand from the site of his martyrdom. Their belief in the efficacy of 'site' was so strong that they could replace the diminishing sands that the pilgrims took away with new material from outside the church, confident that the power of the holy site would transfer to the new material by a process of 'contagion', or simply, touch. Whilst this concept could only be rejected as superstitious nonsense by today's scientific analysis, the stories moved me to make some pilgrim flasks to record my wonder at the strength of belief of the ancients (Figures 29 and 30).

Chronologically at this point, I undertook my own pilgrimage to the sites of the former Byzantine Empire and other places from the lives of the saints. New work that followed my return home to the studio shows the influence of the trip. A beautiful reliquary from the Amadeo Lia Museum in La Spezia, Italy, inspired the efforts made in the next few pieces. Two winged angels hold between them a glass church in a gold frame, which is the reliquary. I searched for the reason for my interest. The first piece, "*Closed Reliquary # 2, 2007, Church & Faith Series*", was a church-like form with cruciform openings in the sides (Figure 31 and 32). Inside was placed a porcelain 'bone', just visible to the viewer who might move their eye around to see inside the vessel. I wanted a way to reach into the reliquary without making overt glass sides. "*Closed Reliquary # 3, 2007, 'Self-reflection', Church & Faith Series*" dealt with this problem. In the sides of this piece I placed squares of degraded mirror glass from an old piece of furniture. This work (Figure 33) was produced for the purpose of exhibiting in the Churches of Christ Theological College (CCTC) Centenary Art Prize exhibition, and responding to the theme "The Light of Life". The piece was awarded the Student Prize and the exhibition judges spoke of their discovery that when they moved around the piece they were conscious of the reflected movement of the light in the mirror. When they looked in the mirror they saw themselves reflected in the side of the reliquary. It was this activity of self reflection, both physically and metaphorically, that I hoped to achieve with the piece.

The dark terracotta clay was chosen for this piece, with the ageing device of a washed back coating of white slip. The clay was impressed with the timber-like finish

reminiscent of weather boards. This finish is simpler and much less ostentatious than the colourful and crusty engobes of earlier reliquaries and achieves the desired end of a more contemplative piece. The 'weatherboard' finish and the form of the piece again reference the timber churches of Australia which nurtured the faith of the early settlers in this country. The Irish cross, again, recognises the contribution of the "Irish Catholic culture" to my personal history. It has become clear that this work, particularly, touches on the subject of life after death and the communion of saints.

This church reliquary form can be seen as a type for a tomb. The mirror glass irresistibly invites the viewer to bend and to bring this to eye-level and look in. 'As in a glass, darkly' one sees one's own reflection and immediately locates oneself, metaphorically, in the reliquary; an action replete with meaning. A companion piece, "*Self-reflection II, Closed Reliquary # 4, 2007, Church & Faith Series*" (Figure 34) took on a completely different form on which the original moulds were re-used and the earlier stoneware engobes were employed. This piece was hexagonal with six small pieces of mirror used in each of the six meeting points. The intent of the piece was the same as for the previous work (Figure 37). This piece was selected by a jury of judges for an exhibition entitled "*Incarnations – What is the image of the invisible God for us today?*" an exhibition of the Uniting Church Centre for Theology and Ministry, Melbourne, June – July, 2007.

The church-like closed reliquaries, with their weather-board style surfaces, continued to provide creative interest for me, and a more formal church closed reliquary followed, which illustrated the presence in Italy of the strange juxtaposition of pagan and Christian ideas. In Assisi, that bastion of Christian pilgrimage, the burial place of Saint Francis of Assisi, there exists, in the centre of the old town, a well preserved facade of a temple to the goddess Minerva from the 1st Century B C. One can step under the imposing entrance, through a door, and suddenly find oneself inside an ornately decorated, blue, Catholic church. For one studying these very ideas it was a small revelation. Figures 35 and 36 show the temple facade and the church interior. Figure 37 illustrates the resulting work "*Transition, Closed Reliquary # 5, 2007, Church & Faith Series.*"

There was now a strong wish to explore further the important form of the “*Closed Reliquary # 1 with Three Crosses, 2006*”. Using the cathedral-like shape as a basis more pieces were produced on a larger scale. Whilst making these closed reliquaries I worked with an accompanying mental consciousness of the memory of deceased loved ones, and as a consequence I entitled them “*Memory of Love*” (Figure 38). Whilst making these my mind was diverted to memories of my parents and sister, all of whom died of cancer. All three were people who lived exemplary lives, very much in the mould of those described as saints, but without their actions being drawn to the attention of the outside world. I like to think that they are ‘among the communion of saints’.⁶¹

Figures 39, 40, and 41 show some of the different forms that the lidded box reliquaries took as the technical research advanced. The experimentation with engobes and oxides gave different results, each with its particular appeal.

I find it most interesting, at this point, to have reached the final stage in the development of the thesis where only one work remained to complete this body of work. This work is entitled “*Italia, Closed Reliquary # 9, 2007, Church & Faith Series*” (Figure 42). A golden church sits high on a mountain side on which are clustered buildings and walled supported passageways, so typical of the old walled fortress towns of the Italy that I found fascinating, and somewhat romantic. Along with this aspect of Italy is the overt ornamentation of everything religious, a habit that may produce both delight and scepticism in the traveller from Australia. This piece brought together my strongest impressions and feelings from my journey.

These reflections on the creative process and meaning of the artworks produced during the life of this project constitute my personal understanding of the works. I do not claim that they will affect the meaning that viewers of these works will bring to them. However, I have provided this explanation to help to clarify and broaden the vision of those viewers who have access to both the exegesis and the artwork, and I hope that it will enhance their enjoyment of the artworks.

⁶¹ The term ‘communion of saints’ is used in Catholic teaching to mean those who have died and gone to Heaven, and who now enjoy the company of all holy spirits and, in some mysterious way, the favour of the presence of God.

The concluding chapter shares some of my reflections upon the perceived outcomes of the three layers of journey just completed. It is a subjective response to the experience and evidence collected and comprises my impressions, as conclusions, having completed the exploration of mystery and the belief in miracles as set out in my objectives for the project.

Chapter Four Conclusion

On the question of superstition versus faith

Over the period of this investigation my engagement with writers in the field of historical religion has convinced me that the transition from paganism to Christianity was not a simple shift to a new form of superstition in the guise of the Christian faith. Rather, it appears that it is more properly viewed as a conscious movement of ordinary people to a new form of religious belief, which they chose to adopt in preference to their former system, paganism. Not all were necessarily willing in their transition to Christianity, being often the subjects of wars and colonisations that brought with them the state religion of their Byzantine conquerors. However, regardless of their initial commitment to a new faith, it remains clear that the rigid orthodoxy of Christianity provided an unswerving pathway for the deep assimilation of this new belief system.

What is also clear, and what has contributed to the ‘new paganism’ debate, is that this new faith made it easy for converts by retaining ideas, metaphors and even some practices that were used by them in their earlier paganistic activity. However, an essential concept here is that these practices and symbols took on a new theological construct under the guidance of the Christian evangelists, and in so doing, became part of accepted religious practice. As a consequence these early Christians were not just an unthinking group who showed evidence of superstitious belief or an unreasonable fear of God. In fact the flourishing nature of Byzantine society, as shown in its commerce, art and literature, seems to indicate a positive and productive people who integrated these religious ideals into their everyday lives.

Of relevance here to the context of this creative art investigation, it would seem that the desire to believe in a supernatural force or a greater other, outside oneself, is grounded in the human spirit, and that it *inevitably finds a tangible way of expression*. Various forces may change the structure or style of that expression, but it seems that it can not be stifled or trivialised as many of the “all religion is superstition” proponents

seek to do. What is implicit to this investigation, I contend, is that the tangible expression of belief can embody metaphysical aspects of belief and faith in their form, and can act as both evidence of, and catalyst for, the unwillingness to disallow belief.

Mystery or Problem; that is the question

The studio practice component of the journey has confirmed for me that ‘mystery’ in faith is a common source of inspiration in the production of artwork. The perceived passionate commitment of the early Christians, when compared to the seemingly uncertain beliefs of Christians today, has also inspired a determination in me to pursue the questions that have caused some personal uncertainties, and to continue to imbue my work with this unwillingness to disallow belief.

The significant revelation that has been drawn from the experience of the studio has been the deepening of the understanding that there are mysteries that cannot be fully comprehended in this life. Within the structure of these mysteries float many beliefs of the Catholic faithful. Not all of these issues are fully understood, but all are the subject of ‘faith’ in its quintessential form.

A reflection on the studio outcomes has, for me, indicated that they tend to confirm a belief in a next life, or, at the very least, point to this belief. Certainly the historical readings have shown that death was a most significant issue for the people of the first centuries B C and A D. The pagans were described as an ‘anxious’ people who readily accepted Christianity because the faith gave them a hope of a benevolent God who provided for the spirit after death. These ancients experienced death as an indiscriminate and inexorable force, taking the newborn and their mothers, children, young men as well as old. They were subject to disease and infection that they could not control and suffered under the forces of nature. For them death was a mystery that could not be understood in any other than a faith context, and the new faith provided some comfort. If we contrast this situation with the modern era we observe that the ‘Enlightenment’ and the age of science have turned death from a mystery into a problem, and problems can be solved, since formerly death-dealing disease and

sickness can now be cured, and life prolonged by modern scientific discovery as never before.

Modern man does not like a problem and will research and experiment until he solves it. He does not like mysteries, and, rather than accept the mystery as something that will unfold gradually throughout a lifetime, but may never be fully understood, he prefers to call a mystery a problem and seek a solution. A consequence of this mentality is the demand for proof for every belief, and as mentioned in the introduction, it leads to the unwillingness to allow belief in anything other than the empirically provable.

These insights have underpinned the making of the artworks throughout this journey, and have been developed through dialogue with the work, the study of history, and visits to significant historical sites. However, even as my journey through the history of the church's beliefs drew near completion, I happened upon *A New Christianity For A New World* by American Episcopalian Bishop John Shelby Spong. In this work it appears that a whole new belief system for understanding Christianity is being proposed. This presentation sees Christianity as a faith system, believing in God but without the supernatural, the theism of the church of history. For Spong, Christ was not the Son of God, did not perform miracles, did not sacrifice himself on the cross or rise from the dead. He was, however, a person of historical significance who, for Spong, is a source of inspiration unique in history, and the model for Spong's own religious living.

This radical departure from the faith of my history, occurring at this point in my investigations, is very thought provoking and has helped me to understand that 'an unwillingness to disallow belief' must be accompanied by a complete openness to the questioning of belief.

It has been personally fascinating to find that significant revelations have occurred through the dialogue between the three types of experiences enjoyed on my investigative journey; the reading of history, the travel to the sites of the Byzantine

Empire and the making of art. The artworks have been ‘tested’ in different forums during the preparation of the thesis; (i) at a solo exhibition of some 47 pieces at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery, Ballarat, over a six week period; (ii) in an exhibition for a Religious art prize at the Churches of Christ Theological College (CCTC) in Melbourne; and (iii) in a juried exhibition of the Uniting Church in Melbourne.

These experiences provided a high degree of affirmation through feedback and public expression, for the original intention of the works. The first affirmation came through strong verbal feedback and a high level of sales, when 32 of the works sold during the exhibition at the Ballarat Fine Art Gallery. One piece, bought by the Gallery for their collection, was described in the Gallery newsletter under the banner of New Acquisitions as: “The ceramic is so fully realised, it would not be hard to believe if it contained saints’ relics and if you touched the tactile surface, you would, indeed be blessed.”⁶² Also, as stated earlier, the work that was entered in the CCTC religious art prize was awarded a first prize in the student section. The judges’ feedback affirmed the very intentions of the work, even adding some thoughts about the work that increased my own understanding of it. They made me aware that when there is movement around the piece there is evidence of reflected light coming from the mirror glass. This was significant when seen as a response to the exhibition theme “*The Light of Life.*”

The steps taken in progressing my art making and the growing public acceptance of the works is encouragement for the belief that meaning and substance is being derived from it by the viewer. This confirms my intention of seeking to put something of myself into each piece, and to continue to believe in my unwillingness to disallow belief, keeping alive my own sense of wonder at the many mysteries of creation that surround me every day. Confirmed also is my desire to drink in the new wonders that scientific discovery, the knowledge explosion and global communications generate for us constantly. I have, however, found no reason to believe that evidence is available to support every aspect of our perception of the world around us or of the human constructs with which we seek to understand that world in order to live. I will

⁶² Ballarat Fine Art Gallery Association Newsletter, Summer 2007

continue to marvel at the unravelling mysteries of birth, life and death, natural cycles, the microcosms and macrocosm of our universe. I cannot help but continue to find in these areas of life mysteries which I am unable to fully comprehend, and which I believe I will never fully understand.

Appendix 1

Nicene Creed

This is a prayer recited at each Catholic Mass by the faithful present, and is intended as a summation of the basics of Catholic theology.

We believe in one God, The Father, the Almighty, Maker of heaven and earth, and of all that is seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, True God from True God, begotten, not made, one in being with the Father; through Him all things were made.

For us men and for our salvation He came down from heaven, by the power of the Holy Spirit He was born of the Virgin Mary, and became man. For our sake He was crucified under Pontius Pilate; He suffered, died and was buried. On the third day He rose again in fulfilment of the scriptures; He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and His kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the Giver of Life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, with the Father and the Son He is worshiped and glorified.

He has spoken through the prophets.

We believe in one holy catholic and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen.

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