

From Rights to Rites: A Eucharistic Reframing of the Abortion Debate

EUGENE R. SCHLESINGER*

In our cultural climate abortion remains a divisive issue, in which much of the rhetoric is toxic. My argument bypasses the usual but contested questions of rights, the beginnings of life, and even moral rectitude, and instead analyzes the Book of Common Prayer's eucharistic liturgy to inform and transform the way Christians approach the debate. Proceeding along ex convenientia lines, I develop a eucharistic account of the body as indefinable and ungraspable, and apply the epiclesis to show that the Eucharist cultivates dispositions oriented away from the practice of abortion. As eucharistic action is voluntary, rather than coerced, this approach also vitiates any potential violation of conscience, keeping it within the parameters set by the Episcopal Church's statements on abortion. Finally, the practice of Eucharist transforms the way opponents in the abortion debate view one another, by referring beyond the current state of affairs to a future of joyful unity and sharing.

Introduction

Few ethical issues remain as polarizing, troubling, and fraught with peril as abortion. At all points along the “pro-life/pro-choice” spectrum, one finds deeply held personal beliefs and convictions, and only rarely will either side grant any legitimacy to the concerns of the other. In the discourse on abortion, far more heat is generated than light, with the result that the question has been derailed into a quagmire.¹ Meanwhile, real people still face these real issues, and

* Eugene R. Schlesinger is a Simeon Fellow at Christ Church in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. Until recently he served as Pastor for Theological Development at 1.21 Church in Winston-Salem, which draws from the Anglican, Reformed, and Free Church traditions. He holds degrees from the University of North Carolina Greensboro (B.A. Religious Studies), and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary (M. Div.).

¹ See Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, third edition (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007), 6–7.

need help and pastoral guidance. In light of this impasse, I propose an entirely different approach to the question, one that takes seriously the admonishment that “in those cases where an abortion is being considered, members of this Church are urged to seek the dictates of their conscience in prayer, to seek the advice and counsel of members of the Christian community and where appropriate, *the sacramental life of this Church*.”² Rather than attempt to adjudicate the thorny and contested issues of the beginnings of life, which rights (whether to life or choice) are more important, or even the moral rightness or wrongness of abortion, I propose that the question be placed firmly within the liturgical and sacramental life of the church, specifically within the sacrament of the Holy Eucharist, the celebration of which constitutes the life of the church.

This approach commends itself for several reasons. First, and pragmatically, the way the question has been framed in the past (rights, the beginning of life, moral rightness) has not led to consensus. Avoiding these questions *can* betray a lack of fortitude. However, if by shifting the discourse to other questions—ones more likely to be answered—then progress could be made, prudence dictates that this makes good sense. In such a case, discretion is the greater part of valor. Indeed, the typical questions surrounding abortion simply smack of casuistry and can quickly degenerate into legalisms, loopholes, and technicalities. Now, at the end of the day, everyone has an opinion as to whether or not abortion is morally right. However, in order to adduce that, explications of and choices between the various options on offer in moral theology must occur, and even then, any statement simply dies the death of a thousand qualifications. Life is too complex for a blanket statement. In part, this motivates the Episcopal Church’s statements on abortion, which recognize the tragic character of abortion, seek to protect individual conscience, and avoid mandating a legislative solution to the problem.³ Hence, my proposal also has the pragmatic value of sidestepping intricate discussions of tutorism, probabilism, probabiorism, deontology, and all the other *isms* Christian moral thought has managed to develop. By

² General Convention, “Reaffirm General Convention Statement on Childbirth and Abortion,” Resolution 1994–A054, *Journal of the General Convention of . . . the Episcopal Church, Indianapolis, 1994* (New York: General Convention, 1995), 323–25. Emphasis added. The resolution is at http://www.episcopalarchives.org/cgi-bin/acts/acts_resolution.pl?resolution=1994-A054.

³ Resolution 1994–A054.

dealing with the liturgy and sacraments of the church, rather than abstract conceptions of right or wrong, this method not only honors the recognition that *lex orandi lex credendi*, it is also more pastorally accessible to the non-specialist.

Granted, there's a desirable simplicity in being able to say, "Abortion is wrong (or right)," but if we are honest we will admit we do not seem to be making much progress that way. So instead, I want to illuminate the question with the liturgy, asking not whether the liturgy answers the question of right or wrong, but how the liturgy shapes, informs, and transforms our imaginations concerning questions of our bodies and the use to which we put them, specifically abortion. Christopher Steck notes a potential weakness of this approach, warning against liturgical idealism that fails to take into account the gap between eschatological consummation and lived reality.⁴ Yet my approach does not seek to ignore that gap; instead, it simply recognizes that for the community the liturgy "give[s] some expression to their deepest beliefs and feelings," or at the very least ought to.⁵ As James K. A. Smith notes, human beings function primarily out of their *desires*, and these desires are shaped through liturgical patterns.⁶ My argument, therefore, proceeds along *ex convenientia* lines, seeking "fittingness" with the Eucharist and the realities to which it points us and which intrude into our lived realities, rather than along *ex necessitate* lines, seeking a definite *yes* or *no* from the sacrament.

The Eucharist is particularly suited for this use in that it is central to the church's existence. Henri de Lubac, John Zizioulas, and Pope Benedict XVI have all highlighted the ecclesial character of the Eucharist, as have many before them.⁷ If the Eucharist reveals the nature of the church and mysteriously brings that reality to fruition, then

⁴ Christopher W. Steck, S.J., "Graced Encounters: Liturgy and Ethics from a Balthasarian Perspective," *Horizons* 30, no. 2 (2003): 255–279.

⁵ See Peter J. Leithart, "The Way Things Really Ought to Be: Eucharist, Eschatology, and Culture," *Westminster Theological Journal* 59, no. 2 (Fall 1997): 159–176.

⁶ James K. A. Smith, *Desiring the Kingdom: Worship, Worldview, and Cultural Formation* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2009).

⁷ Henri de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum: L'Eucharistie et l'Église au Moyen Age* (Paris: Aubier, 1949); John Zizioulas, *Being as Communion: Studies in Personhood and the Church* (Crestwood, N.Y.: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1985); Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, *Called to Communion: Understanding the Church Today*, trans. Adrian Walker (San Francisco, Calif.: Ignatius, 1996); John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1960), 4.17.38.

Christians cannot neglect it in connection with their common life. As William Crockett notes, “The danger today is the very opposite of the danger in the sixteenth century. The danger then was that people would believe in a physical miracle in the mass. The danger today is that people will fail to connect the acts of sacramental eating and drinking with their bodies and with the earth.”⁸ The sacrament’s complex interplay of bodies (our bodies, Christ’s body, us as Christ’s body, and so forth) only compounds this appropriateness.⁹ How then does the account of embodiment in the church’s eucharistic action inform the way we think of bodies in the “real world,” especially in connection with abortion?

Heeding Brian Spinks’s warning that liturgical theologies would do well to interact with actual liturgies, since there is no abstract “Eucharist” floating about as a Platonic form, but rather only concrete Eucharists, which exist as they are celebrated by churches,¹⁰ I will be using the orders for the Holy Eucharist in the American *Book of Common Prayer* (1979) as the basis for examination.¹¹ I choose these liturgies for two primary reasons. First, their place in an actual *Book of Common Prayer* means that they retain the official force of formularies. While Anglicans have made great strides in liturgical innovation over the last several decades (alternative service books, and the Church of England’s *Common Worship*), the American Prayer Book has a more binding character than these other liturgies. Second, their place in the current Prayer Book means that they remain in use in actual congregations. For all the credence paid to the 1662 *Book of Common Prayer* within certain Anglican circles, only rarely are its liturgies used. A non-celebrated liturgy will not do much in transforming our vision of this issue.

While this does mean that my examination will not cover the *entire* spectrum of Anglican liturgies, to my mind this is not fatal to my thesis for two primary reasons. First, the language of Rite I retains great continuity in form and content with previous liturgies of the

⁸ William R. Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation* (New York: Pueblo Publishing Company, 1989), 261.

⁹ de Lubac, *Corpus Mysticum*.

¹⁰ Brian D. Spinks, “From Liturgical Theology to Liturgical Theologies: Schmemmann’s Legacy in Western Churches,” paper presented at St. Vladimir’s Orthodox Theological Seminary in Yonkers, New York, January 31, 2009.

¹¹ *The Book of Common Prayer* (New York: Church Hymnal Corporation, 1979). Hereafter page numbers are cited in the text.

Western church, whether previous *Books of Common Prayer*, the Sarum Rite, or even the Roman Canon.¹² In fact, a perusal of worldwide Anglican eucharistic liturgies confirmed that, in general, the form and words of the 1662 English Prayer Book are the general starting point of these rites, though in many cases, the Scottish order has taken precedence (this is the case in the United States, due to Samuel Seabury's influence).¹³ Second, even given alternative services, there is a great deal of overlap between the American Prayer Book and contemporary liturgies, as they tend to draw from common sources such as Hippolytus (Eucharistic Prayer A), the Syrian tradition (Eucharistic Prayer B), and Saint Basil (Eucharistic Prayer D).¹⁴ So, while some details might be missed, in general, the broad swath of Anglican eucharistic practice should be covered in these reflections. These preliminaries addressed, I turn to the rite itself.

Sursum Corda: The Context of Liturgy

Within the prayer of consecration bodies abound, most notably Christ's. But before examining these bodies, the wider context needs to be established. The Great Thanksgiving, following on the heels of the Liturgy of the Word, sets off with the *Sursum Corda*, casting the life of the worshipers as *coram Deo*: with the Lord and with grateful hearts lifted to him. In the Eucharist we have fundamentally to do with God, finding it our duty and privilege "at all times, and in all places" to live lives of grateful adoration to God (*BCP*, p. 333). Immediately, then, the liturgy de-centers humanity, with rights and concerns over them fading in the glory of the one who "dwells in unapproachable light" (1 Tim. 6:16). Indeed, Catherine Pickstock points to the fundamental instability of the liturgical subject. By entering into the liturgy one adopts a persona whose identity is borrowed from and constituted by God, and becomes enmeshed in a complex exchange of losing and finding oneself via participation in God's perichoretic dance of

¹² Edward P. Echlín, *The Anglican Eucharist in Ecumenical Perspective: Doctrine and Rite from Cranmer to Seabury* (New York: The Seabury Press, 1968). See also Dom Gregory Dix, *The Shape of the Liturgy* (London: Dacre, 1945).

¹³ J. H. Arnold, ed., *Anglican Liturgies* (London: Oxford University Press, 1939). On Seabury's influence see Echlín, *Anglican Eucharist*, 205–235.

¹⁴ Kenneth Stevenson *The Eucharist and Offering* (New York: The Pueblo Publishing Company, 1986), 206–209.

self-donation. Indeed, in many ways the liturgy serves to highlight that our lives are always so characterized.¹⁵

David Kelsey notes that humanity's "ultimate context" is the creative "giving and receiving" love of God, such that "human dignity is . . . *ex-centric*, grounded and centered outside human creatures."¹⁶ The Episcopal Church's statements on abortion highlight the unique dignity of human beings, and yet as Kelsey and the liturgy demonstrate, that dignity is not *absolute* and *intrinsic*, but rather contingent, dependent, and finally eccentric because theocentric. This should not be understood as abridging human dignity, or saying that it does not matter, but merely recognizing its derivative character. Indeed, Kelsey notes, "The theocentric concept of human dignity . . . justifies the ascription of absolute value to human beings on the grounds that God relates to them creatively and calls them to a certain vocation."¹⁷ Indeed, this dignity "must be acknowledged by us" by "nurtur[ing] the well-being of such capacities and powers [others] may have for their own accountable response" to God, and by "avoiding actions that . . . violate [their] capacities for accountable response."¹⁸ This serves a dual function: on the one hand, we enter the rite with a realization that our concerns, our rights (such as they are), and even our very selves are subordinate to the concerns and priorities of God. Already, the logic of abortion, with its concerns for personal rights, is undermined by an acknowledgment that we are not our own, but belong instead to God. Yet, on the other hand, entering the rite also precludes the use of coercion in the enterprise of preventing abortion. Any solutions or suggestions proffered will need to remain in line with these twin concerns.

With the church catholic's temporary joining "with Angels and Archangels, and with all the company of heaven" in the unending hymn of the *Sanctus* having ended, the celebrant moves into the prayer of consecration, narrating the salvific self-donation and oblation of Christ on the cross, and the warrant for the rite. The scene, then, is one not only of a de-centered humanity, but of a humanity on

¹⁵ Catherine Pickstock, *After Writing: On the Liturgical Consummation of Philosophy* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 192–213, 233–252.

¹⁶ David H. Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence: A Theological Anthropology*, vol. 1 (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 273, 275.

¹⁷ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 276.

¹⁸ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 279–280.

the receiving end of radical, lavish grace, and implicated in Christ's sacrifice on the cross.

This sacrificial motif will continue throughout the celebration. It is, after all, the entire warrant for the meal, though during Reformation-era polemics the notion of the Eucharist as a sacrifice was hotly contested territory, as William Crockett notes:

The language of sacrifice attached itself in early Christianity not only to the cross, but also to the life of Christians and to the eucharist. The tenacity of this link between eucharist and sacrifice over the centuries reflects the instinct that Christians have had that somehow what is celebrated symbolically in the eucharist links Christians with God's act of self-giving in the cross of Jesus and points to the meaning of Christian discipleship as a way of self-giving love.¹⁹

Some notion of eucharistic sacrifice has been present throughout the history of the church, especially within Anglicanism.²⁰ Yet even within the more straightforwardly Protestant communions, the sacrificial character of the Eucharist is not wholly at odds with the tradition.²¹ Though some remain uneasy with the suggestion, these days any ecumenically serious account of the Eucharist must not only take the notion of sacrifice into account, but also take it seriously. And so as our horizons are fused with Christ's through the sacrament of his body and blood, we are drawn into *this* sacrificial narrative, and moved through the Holy Spirit into a Christ-shaped lifestyle of self-donation.

The Words of Institution and the Eucharist's Conception of Bodies

With the stage thus set and the sacrament's *raison d'être* established, the prayer of consecration moves on to the words of institution, where Christ pronounces bread to be his body and wine to be his

¹⁹ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 260.

²⁰ See Stevenson, *Eucharist and Offering* and Echlin, *Anglican Eucharist*.

²¹ See, for example, The Westminster Confession of Faith, Article XXIX; B. A. Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude: The Eucharistic Theology of John Calvin* (Minneapolis, Minn.: Fortress Press, 1993), 124–156; Kilian McDonnell, O.S.B., *John Calvin, the Church, and the Eucharist* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1967), 280–288; Gustaf Aulén, *Eucharist and Sacrifice*, trans. Eric H. Wahlstrom (Philadelphia, Pa.: Muhlenberg Press, 1958); George Hunsinger, *The Eucharist and Ecumenism: Let Us Keep the Feast* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 128–186.

blood, and notes that these are “given” for his disciples. As thoroughly as sacrifice is entwined in the rite, bodies are even more inescapable. The account of embodiment here has vexed the church throughout much of its history and especially since the Protestant Reformation. The debate has typically hinged on the relation of the elements of bread and wine to Christ’s body and blood. Though some traditions (Roman Catholic and Lutheran) have tended to more formally define this relation, the Anglican and Reformed traditions have typically refused to define the precise relation between bread and body; Calvin, for instance, preferred to experience the reception of Christ’s body and blood in the sacrament rather than to understand it.²² And Crockett’s appraisal of post-Cranmerian Anglicanism is fitting: “The goal of the eucharist is not the production of the real presence, but the nourishment of Christian believers. The real presence is the presupposition rather than the focus of their thought.”²³

And yet recent proposals in both traditions have sought to move beyond this doctrine of an undefined but certain presence of Christ in the sacrament. From the Reformed side, George Hunsinger has proffered the more patristic and Eastern notion of transelementation as a viable ecumenical way forward. While somewhat ambiguous, transelementation involves a sacramental conversion of the bread and wine such that they are taken up into and participate in the body and blood of Christ. Throughout his proposal, Hunsinger’s stated concern is ecumenical convergence, especially along the lines of being able to maintain a first order discourse of the bread and wine as Christ’s body and blood in the eucharistic liturgy without equivocation.²⁴ Hence, even with his more detailed and philosophical consideration, Hunsinger has not fundamentally diverged from the stance of the Anglican divines cited by Crockett.

At the same time, Graham Ward and Catherine Pickstock, key voices within the predominantly Anglican Radical Orthodoxy scene, have called for a reappraisal of transubstantiation.²⁵ Though they em-

²² Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.7, 32. See also Gerrish, *Grace and Gratitude*, 173–182.

²³ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 196.

²⁴ Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 47–92, esp. 74–75 and 59–64.

²⁵ Graham Ward, *Cities of God* (London: Routledge, 2000), 81–96, 102–103, 152–181; Pickstock, *After Writing*, 253–266; and Catherine Pickstock, “Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist,” in *Catholicism and Catholicity: Eucharistic Communities in Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ed. Sarah Beckwith (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1999), 47–68.

ploy different arguments to defend the view, they proffer the same basic contention that transubstantiation gives us an account of signification in the Eucharist “beyond presence and absence.”²⁶ Their accounts of transubstantiation seek to revalorize and refound semiotics, and to resist objectifying, reifying, and fetishizing eucharistic presence. In so doing, they point out that, though it has been forgotten frequently, Aquinas’s doctrine of transubstantiation excluded the notion that Christ’s presence in the sacrament is carnal, reified, or local.²⁷ However, given Pickstock’s references to “physical” reception of God in the Eucharist,²⁸ and Ward’s emphasis on the “displaced body of Jesus Christ” with the body of the “gendered Jew” fading in importance, and almost if not altogether disappearing²⁹—despite Aquinas’s manifest interest in the continuing bodily integrity of the ascended Christ and even of his body’s local presence in heaven³⁰—their Thomistic pedigree is somewhat in doubt.

I cannot negotiate all the contours of these arguments in an article of this scope. And indeed the Prayer Book liturgy simply does not afford a means for ultimately doing so. The relation between the signs and the thing signified remains undefined in the rite. However, I want to note that the common feature of all these accounts—even those of greater philosophical sophistication and detail—is that the body of Christ is present in the sacrament in a mysterious way. The Eucharist opens up this fact about all bodies. As Bryan Turner notes, “The body is at once the most solid, the most elusive, illusory, concrete, metaphysical, ever-present, and ever-distant thing—a site, an instrument, an environment, a singularity and a multiplicity.”³¹ Our bodies are not made to be reified, objectified, or grasped; they only come to us in passing, as it were. Especially with the passing away

²⁶ Pickstock, *After Writing*, 253. See also Pickstock, “Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist,” 64, which draws upon Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being*: Hors-Texte, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 139–158. Similarly Ward, *Cities of God*, 156–167.

²⁷ Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiæ*, III. q. 75 a.1–2, 7; q. 76 a.1–6; q.77 a.7; Pickstock, *After Writing*, 259–261; Pickstock, “Thomas Aquinas and the Quest for the Eucharist,” 51–53, 64–65; Ward, *Cities of God*, 156–161; Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 113–121; Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 23–28.

²⁸ Pickstock, *After Writing*, 230–231.

²⁹ Ward, *Cities of God*, 97–116.

³⁰ See Hunsinger, *Eucharist and Ecumenism*, 23–28.

³¹ Bryan S. Turner, *The Body and Society: Explorations in Social Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1984), 8.

of modernity with the enclosed Cartesian self,³² this ineffability, effervescence, and ungraspability of our selves and our bodies has been increasingly manifest.

And yet, often all this talk of mystery and speculation regarding the extent to which Christ is present or absent, or whether those are the proper categories, or which semiotics is most appropriate to analyze the sacrament, a fundamental fact can be obscured: bodies are also given away. Whatever it might mean to call bread his body, “Jesus is represented as giving himself away. He does *not* hold on to or assert what distinguishes him as an individual.”³³ Not only are bodies undefinable and ungraspable, they also cannot be kept for and to oneself. Bodies are made to be given—given away for the benefit of others, even when the cost of that donation is high. This adds a further factor weighing against the practice of abortion, which does seek precisely to define and hold onto one’s body. The sorts of bodies we encounter in the Eucharist resist our grasping attempts to claim them as our own.

So, then, in ways that defy our explanation—and open up hitherto unrealized realities about the nature of embodiment—Christ gives himself, body and blood, to his disciples and his church in this meal. An act of such magnitude ought always to be remembered, and so the anamnesis continues the ritual narration, explaining that the Eucharist proceeds according to Christ’s command, and in grateful memory of his death, resurrection, and ascension. Hence, throughout the prayer of consecration, the context and the motivation for all that occurs is the gospel: the good news of Christ’s death and resurrection for sinners. All flows from his self-emptying act, none is brought about through obligation or coercion. This will be crucial to remember in what follows.

Epiclesis: Bodies (re)Conceived by the Power of the Holy Spirit

Following on the words of institution and anamnesis, the epiclesis bridges the gap between consecration and communion. Though this element of the anaphora has a storied and controversial history, mainly centering upon the “moment of consecration,”³⁴ it has gener-

³² Pickstock, *After Writing*, 47–100.

³³ Jonathan Bishop, *Some Bodies: The Eucharist and its Implications* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1992), 43.

³⁴ See John H. McKenna, *The Eucharistic Epiclesis: A Detailed History from the Patristic to the Modern Era*, second edition (Chicago, Ill.: Hillenbrand Books, 2008), 207–227.

ally been a mainstay of Anglican prayers of consecration, especially in the United States, under the influence of Samuel Seabury's preference for the Scottish order of consecration. The epiclesis is vital for recognizing that the Eucharist occurs precisely through the power of God, rather than mere human action, and it is pregnant with implications for the matter of abortion.

First, as McKenna notes, there are parallels between the Spirit's action in the epiclesis and his action in the great events of redemptive history: Pentecost, the incarnation, the resurrection, and the ascension.³⁵ As Eugene F. Rogers notes, this is entirely appropriate, as the Spirit delights to repose upon the body of the Son immanently in the Holy Trinity and economically in these and other events.³⁶ The Spirit who overshadows bread and wine (and the believing community) to make them Christ's body and blood in the Eucharist is the same Spirit who overshadowed the virgin's womb and there created the fetal body of Christ. This association between epiclesis and the incarnation in Mary's womb surely ought to work at cross-purposes with the practice of abortion, which in this case would have made impossible the salvation of the world through Jesus Christ.

Indeed, this reflection on the fetal body of Christ might raise questions regarding to what extent the unborn child is a participant in the Eucharist.³⁷ While it may be a stretch to picture fetal communion within the womb, and ordinarily the rubrics would restrict communion to the baptized, which has obviously not occurred in utero, ultimately this question depends upon one's account of the modes of presence and reception, with the more ontologically charged accounts open to greater ambiguity, while others would rule it out *tout court*. As noted, though, the liturgy itself does not resolve these issues. However, even apart from those considerations, during fetal development the child is dependent upon the mother for nourishment and sustenance. So even if the unborn do not, properly speaking, receive communion, this fact ought not to be lost on the mother as she is sacramentally nourished and sustained with Christ's body and blood. Everything she eats or drinks has *some* effect on the nascent child.

³⁵ McKenna, *The Eucharistic Epiclesis*, 178–182, 222–223.

³⁶ Eugene F. Rogers, Jr., *After the Spirit: A Constructive Pneumatology from Resources outside the Modern West* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 75–178.

³⁷ I am indebted to Eugene F. Rogers for raising this question.

Second, through work of the Holy Spirit, we offer ourselves to God.³⁸ This is expressed variously in the different eucharistic prayers. In Rite II, this moment is typically connected with the epiclesis, as the Holy Spirit is invoked as the sanctifier of the elements and the gathered community. All four prayers include some sense of being enlisted into the purposes of God as exemplified by his Son: “Sanctify us also that we may . . . serve you in unity, constancy, and peace” (*BCP*, p. 363); “Unite us to your Son in his sacrifice” (*BCP*, p. 369); “Open our eyes to see your hand at work in the world around us. . . . Let the grace of this Holy Communion make us one body, one spirit in Christ, that we may worthily serve the world in his name” (*BCP*, p. 372); “Grant that all who share this bread and cup may become one body and one spirit, a living sacrifice in Christ” (*BCP*, p. 375). Hence, these prayers emphasize the telos of the self-oblation: to serve God and his purposes. Whatever our rights may be, they are not our own.

The eucharistic prayer in Rite I is even more pointed, as we “offer and present” to God “our selves, our souls and bodies, to be a reasonable, holy, and living sacrifice” (*BCP*, p. 336). As Pickstock notes, this sort of oblation is inescapable: “When we receive the gifts of bread and wine, which are the mystery of the incarnation, we receive God by receiving our transformed humanity in Christ, through whose divinity, we are enabled to offer our gifts to God. Thus, it is only because of, and within God’s gift to us, that we are able, first, to receive our humanity, and, secondly, to offer gifts. But this means, concomitantly, that *it is only by means of offering gifts that we receive our true humanity.*”³⁹ To be human is to receive oneself from and then to give oneself back to God. Sin has distorted, even broken this cycle, but now, in receiving Christ and giving ourselves, it is restored as we participate in an endless cycle of reception, donation, re-reception, and so forth, which mirrors the joyful sharing of God in Godself.⁴⁰ And yet, because it is rooted in the infinite plenitude of the Triune God, such oblation is never properly conceived of as a loss, because it always issues in a greater and fuller return.

³⁸ Frances Young, “The Great Thanksgiving Prayer,” in *Living the Eucharist: Affirming Catholicism and the Liturgy*, ed. Stephen Conway (London: Dartman, Longman, and Todd, 2001), 90.

³⁹ Pickstock, *After Writing*, 242. Emphasis added.

⁴⁰ Pickstock, *After Writing*, 233–252.

In giving ourselves away, we receive ourselves in a truer, fuller sort of way than would have been possible without this sacrifice. Far from robbing us of human dignity, this sacrifice actually amplifies that dignity, even while redirecting it away from selfish ends to selfless ones modeled on God's own kenotic love. To conceive of this in a calculating way, as though it were an equation, certainly betrays the heart of the matter, but *were* one to introduce a balance sheet, no matter what is given up, even one's own self—body and soul, along with any rights thereto—the giver comes out ahead.

Pickstock describes the logic thus: “In pointing away from himself (towards the bread) in order to point towards himself (‘my body’), [Jesus] disperses himself as gift. . . . In receiving this bequest, we do not then possess it as it were a thing, but must in turn bequeath ourselves, for we are part of that body we receive.”⁴¹ To put it baldly, in the Eucharist, communicants give up themselves, their bodies, their very lives. Whatever rights we may have, here they are lain down after the pattern of Jesus handing over his body in the sacrament, to the glory of God and for the good of the church. It is not so much that rights are given up as they are redirected.

The Eucharist enshrines Christ giving up his body so that others might live. Through self-sacrifice Christ gives us life in the sacrament of “new and unending life” (*BCP*, p. 363). And in our celebration of the Eucharist, we are caught up into this sacrifice, recognizing that to give up our bodies is only “reasonable” in light of what God offers. On the other hand, both abortion and unwanted pregnancy involve one party (mother or unborn) giving up her body *by coercion*, while the other holds onto hers at the expense of the other. This is the tragic dimension of abortion and unwanted pregnancies. On their own, they represent a zero-sum game. Someone is going to lose. And yet our celebration of the Eucharist works at cross-purposes with the zero-sum mentality, because in it we pray for and trust God to bring about a different reality, one in which no one is *forced* to be the loser. Christ came, and gave himself up to defeat so that his people could be set free from the dead-end, zero-sum logic of this present evil age. And by participation in this meal, new dispositions are cultivated which allow us to reconceive victory and defeat, instead proceeding according

⁴¹ Pickstock, *After Writing*, 263.

to the logic of compassion, without seeing this as a loss.⁴² As we come to God—through Christ who compassionately gave himself up for the sake of the helpless (ourselves included), and who himself came as a fetus in the womb—as recipients of such great benefit, and relinquish our claims upon our own bodies, abortion’s attractiveness as a viable option simply fades. The Eucharist precludes abortion, not by way of imposition, nor by prohibition, but by catching its partakers up into a life—freely given—whose basis is completely different.

Note, though, that this oblation is not coerced in any way, but instead offered freely. In the Eucharist, bodies are given and received, but never taken. Nobody “takes” communion; it must be received.⁴³ Christ lay down his life, with no one taking it from him (John 10:18). In the Eucharist, bodies are not objects, but rather subjects.⁴⁴ Indeed, this was one of Calvin’s primary objections to medieval conceptions of transubstantiation: their reified notion of presence left Christ as an object to be manipulated, rather than the subject of the Eucharist.⁴⁵ There is an intelligent, voluntary, willful handing over of ourselves, not a coercive, unwilling taking of them.⁴⁶ Hence, women *cannot* be exploited by a eucharistic ethic regarding abortion. This is all strictly voluntary. No one can demand it, at least not on the logic of the Eucharist. Even Christ’s sacrifice was voluntary, rather than demanded. We should not expect that our sacrifice, following on his example, would be different. So not only can we ourselves not hold onto our bodies, neither can anyone take them from us. Rather than forcing us into anything, the Eucharist frees us to give our bodies to God in joyful gratitude and to share them with others.

⁴² M. Cathleen Kaveny, without reference to the Eucharist, casts abortion in terms of virtue theory in “Toward a Thomistic Perspective on Abortion and the Law in Contemporary America,” *Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review* 55, no. 3 (July 1991): 343–396.

⁴³ Robert F. Taft, S.J., *Beyond East and West: Problems in Liturgical Understanding*, second edition (Rome: Pontifical Oriental Institute, 1997), 133–142.

⁴⁴ Yet note the complex treatment of the relation between subjectivity and objectivity in Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74–75.

⁴⁵ Crockett, *Eucharist: Symbol of Transformation*, 154; and see, for example, Calvin, *Institutes*, 4.17.31.

⁴⁶ Pickstock, *After Writing*, 208.

The Feminist Critique

Florynce Kennedy once opined that “If men could get pregnant, abortion would be a sacrament.” While cynical, this statement does point to the all-too-tragic fact that women, rather than men, bear the brunt of unplanned/unwanted pregnancy. How would the Eucharist address this evil? To begin, as Rowan Williams has noted, the Eucharist is located within a narrative of a person’s betrayal, exploitation, and bodily violation,⁴⁷ yet, as Graham Ward is fond of noting, this particular body was gendered male.⁴⁸ Hence, the social situation in which women are the primary sufferers is at odds with the Eucharist, in which the bridegroom offers up his body on behalf of his bride. In the violation of this male body, God takes up the suffering and violation of all bodies—male and female alike—into the care and anamnesis of God and the church. A church that wants to take the Eucharist seriously vis-à-vis abortion needs to consider how men can share in bearing the burdens of women.⁴⁹

Communicants are “made one body with him, that he may dwell in us, and we in him” (*BCP*, p. 336). Christ stands with women, as does the entire church. The ecclesial body of Christ is a multigendered community, mutually implicated in the care and concerns of others. This solidarity goes beyond sisterhood communities, or patriarchal patronizing in which the “strong” men care for the “weak” women. Instead, the requisite communal structure to provide women with support is (or ought to be) formed. If the Eucharist fosters dispositions inclining women away from abortion, moving women to compassionately give of their very substance for the helpless fetal neighbor, then the church must ensure that unplanned pregnancies do not lead to an oppressive or intolerable burden.⁵⁰ This returns us to Kelsey’s note that human dignity ought always to be respected, and that the conditions for its flourishing ought to be safeguarded.⁵¹

⁴⁷ Rowan Williams, “The Sacraments of the New Society,” in *Christ: the Sacramental Word: Incarnation, Sacrament, and Poetry*, ed. David Brown and Ann Loades (London: SPCK, 1996), 94–97.

⁴⁸ Ward, *Cities of God*, 97–116.

⁴⁹ See Kaveny, “Toward a Thomistic Perspective on Abortion,” 382–383.

⁵⁰ Kaveny, “Toward a Thomistic Perspective on Abortion,” 382–390.

⁵¹ Kelsey, *Eccentric Existence*, 279.

Hence, this proposal and conclusion is consonant with the Episcopal Church's official pronouncements upon abortion, which oppose coercive approaches to eliminating abortion. So much of the rhetoric about abortion centers upon legal coercion and who will wield the might of the state for their cause. And the Episcopal Church's statements wisely note that any legislative solutions will ultimately fall short of solving the problem. So instead of a power struggle or a battle of wills, whether between left or right, or between women and the unborn, the actions depicted here are strictly voluntary. The full freedom and "dignity of every human being" is respected (*BCP*, p. 305), even as the Eucharist shows how that freedom and dignity ought to be directed, as they are taken up into Christ's sacrifice.

While there is certainly a place for the church as institution to set and enforce policies, and even to enact consequences (for example, Matthew 18:15–17; 1 Corinthians 5), this proposal proceeds along entirely different lines, specifically because it concerns the Eucharist, and not the totality of Christian revelation and tradition. Rather than transforming the Eucharist—which celebrates the gracious self-offering of Christ, and draws out the grateful self-offering of its participants—into a tool for coercion, I am proposing that the inner logic of the rite transforms the way we *think* about our bodies, our "rights," and finally about abortion. Rather than attempting to tell anyone what they can or cannot do, I propose that we ask what would happen if God were to grant the prayers offered in the Eucharist. After all, given the state of the debate, it would appear that nothing short of divine intervention will bring resolution anyway. However, given the eschatological cast of the meal, I think it appropriate for this essay to end not with a simple resolution, but in a proleptic reaching beyond and exceeding of itself, propelling us beyond a mere "answer" to the question of abortion.

Eschatology, Unity, and "the Other"

In this final section, I would like to suggest that the Eucharist's import extends beyond merely informing the way we conceive of our bodies. It also transforms the way we view others, most notably those with whom we disagree. This is especially salutary given the rancor from both sides in the abortion debate. In Rite I's supplications we pray that "we, and all others who shall be partakers of this Holy Communion, may . . . be filled with [God's] grace and heavenly

benediction, and made one body with him” (*BCP*, p. 336, echoed in Prayer D). Again, the question comes, what would happen if God were to grant this prayer? In this meal God takes enemies, traitors, sinners, and the unworthy, and gathers them together to be his children, his friends, forming them together into one body through the work of Christ. And if God is at work to bring this about, it ought also to be the expectation and desire of communicants.

In the Prayer of Humble Access, communicants confess that they cannot approach the table “trusting in [their] own righteousness,” but must instead rely on God’s “manifold and great mercies.” On their own merits, they could not even lick up the spilled crumbs like the family dog. Were they not dealing with “the same Lord whose property is always to have mercy,” they would be turned away hungry (*BCP*, p. 337). This precludes any pretension of superiority on the part of any participant in the rite. Instead, all are gathered on an equal footing, radically dependent upon grace, able to draw near on the basis of the cross-work of Christ celebrated in the sacrament. This ought to promote radical humility and acceptance.

United around the table, we find brothers and sisters who take differing views on abortion. While I may be convinced that my own views are correct, and even that those who disagree ought to repent and take my position, I cannot at the same time confess myself to be of one body with them; I cannot ask God to fill them with grace and blessing while I also despise them. The postcommunion prayers include a similar confession that all partakers are “living members” of Christ’s body (*BCP*, p. 366), and in Rite I also a prayer “that we may continue in that holy fellowship” (*BCP*, p. 339). Not only has God put us all in this together, but here we are asking him to keep us together! David may have had a table prepared in the presence of his enemies (Psalm 23:5), but the Lord’s Table teaches us a different perspective. These people are not enemies, even though they may be opponents in this particular debate. If God welcomes and embraces these people at the table, so also should fellow Christians.

Yet, this does not promote a laissez-faire approach to the sacrament. The exhortation preceding the communion service warns of the dangers of unworthy participation, and admonishes all hearers to self-examination, repentance, and reparation before drawing near for communion (*BCP*, pp. 316–317). And, when self-discipline fails, the Prayer Book contains disciplinary rubrics, outlining circumstances under which communion may be withheld from parishioners

(*BCP*, p. 409). The most obvious application of these principles has been the call upon bishops to excommunicate politicians who support abortion rights. By and large, eucharistic discipline becomes a tool of the pro-life side of the debate. But I want to think beyond this narrow application, and indeed see that such discipline can cut both ways. In the exhortation, would-be communicants are urged not approach the repast until they are reconciled and at peace with their neighbors; indeed, the only explicitly identified barriers to communion are violations of neighbor love (*BCP*, pp. 317, 409). In situations characterized by mutual suspicion and hatred, both pro-choice and pro-life parishioners are liable for this discipline. The ideal would be for parties to seek reconciliation immediately, even on their way to the altar (Matt. 5:23–24). However, in those cases where the parties *refuse* reconciliation, it might be appropriate for them to refrain from participation until they have learned to view and interact with their opponents charitably, in a manner consistent with the sacrament. This is a frightening prospect: what does it indicate about people if they would rather forgo communion with the Lord and his grace than be reconciled with a brother or sister? But perhaps the discomfiture of this mutual abstention would provide an incentive to develop such charitable interactions. Yet why stop there?

Geoffrey Wainwright, in the context of ecumenical intercommunion dialogues, points out that in cases of serious division, churches might be more in line with Christ's instructions in Matthew by mutual refraining from participation in the sacrament until they are in a state of unity allowing for eucharistic sharing.⁵² And in the case of the abortion debate, it *may* be that such an abstention may be in order. However, I remain unconvinced that "abstinence only" is the best policy in this regard. Wainwright concurs, noting:

The eucharist is more important for *what it makes of* us than for what it expresses as already being true of us, for our love for one another is certainly to be increased and deepened in the coming and final kingdom in comparison with what it is already . . . Common participation in the one eucharist must be allowed to promote reconciliation among the opposing groups . . . [so long as there exists] the will to reconciliation.⁵³

⁵² Geoffrey Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981), 142.

⁵³ Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 142.

To put it another way, if the two opposing sides recognize the eschatological peace and unity to which the Eucharist points as desirable, and their own present dissention, adversity, and even animosity as both temporary and undesirable, then the Eucharist could serve the further function of “allow[ing] the Lord creatively to bring us closer to the perfect peace and unity that will mark the final kingdom.”⁵⁴

After all, the Eucharist is an eschatological meal, projecting us forward into the glorious future when there is no more rancor or discord, and all are united in joyful feasting around the banquet table of the Lamb’s wedding feast. While here and now we disagree, sometimes strongly, the Eucharist teaches us to think ahead to a time when these disagreements are settled: not by coercion (whether through political machinations, or by rhetorical superiority), but by a surpassingly joyful awe at the One who fills all in all. Granted, the Eucharist is a prolepsis of the eschaton, and not the consummation itself,⁵⁵ but it does show the telos toward which we tend, and to which, in the fullness of time, we will be brought. It shows us “the way things really ought to be.”⁵⁶ So, while the ends may not justify the means, they should certainly inform them. If we want God to answer these prayers, perhaps we ought to begin by living as if he has and is. And if we do not want God to answer them, then why bother with the liturgy? As Flannery O’Connor said, “Well, if it’s [only] a symbol, to hell with it.”

Conclusion

In this brief paper, I have attempted to move beyond the typical contours of the abortion debate, leaving behind the somewhat foundationalist and casuistic discourse of rights, indeed most traditional categories of moral theology, and instead focusing the gaze upon Jesus (Heb. 12:2), especially as he is given to the church in the Eucharist. Rather than attempting to adjudicate or resolve the debate, I have sought to provide a pastorally viable means of examining abortion based upon an entirely different discourse: the church’s sacramental rites, specifically the Eucharist.

The argument from the Eucharist must be *ex convenientia* rather than *ex necessitate* because the Eucharist itself does not carry coercive force. So instead of providing a “slam dunk” for one side or the

⁵⁴ Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 143.

⁵⁵ Wainwright, *Eucharist and Eschatology*, 119–121.

⁵⁶ Leithart, “The Way Things Really Ought to Be.”

other, which clearly and unequivocally rules out the other view, it allows the opportunity to demonstrate a fittingness between eucharistic practice and forgoing abortion. Rather than a liability, I view this as an asset. Typically, those arguments which seem to be “slam dunks” start from such radically different places that no one taking a different view *can* be persuaded, leading only to further ossification and entrenchment.⁵⁷ Better to find common ground and work from there, making only modest gains, than to overstretch in make a “winning” argument to which no one listens. But an *ex convenientia* argument cannot be used coercively, which produces the ironic result that it actually goes farther than it would were it to attempt to reach farther.

And so my proposal is not naive: if people are not forced to forgo abortion, they very well may elect to have the procedure. But submitting oneself to the gospel also means forgoing the ability to control outcomes or other people. This is nothing new; from the earliest times the Christian evangel has led some to antinomian conclusions, even if such conclusions are deemed out of bounds (Rom. 3:8; 6:1–2; Gal. 5:13). One should not expect a distinctively Christian argument—one claiming fidelity to this gospel—not to include this possibility. The Eucharist and the gospel it proclaims is non-coercive, leaving open the possibility that the freedom it opens up will be used in either uncompassionate or irresponsible or even sinful ways (problems that exist quite apart from the question of abortion). The Eucharist cannot *control* behavior. Therefore, as a national social program, the Eucharist fails dismally, but then again is it not the case that “legislation concerning abortions will not address the root of the problem”?⁵⁸

Yet as a pastoral tool, informing and guiding the consciences and moral imaginations of parishioners, the Eucharist can have a profound impact as parishioners come to see their bodies as not their own, but rather in transition, ungraspable, and constantly given away for the benefit of others, just as Christ gives his body to the church in the supper and to his Father on the cross. Likewise, the epicletic resonances with the Spirit overshadowing the fetal Son of God can profoundly reshape the way women view the hitherto unwanted fetuses they carry. My hope is not so much that the Eucharist would eliminate the choice of abortion as that it would foreclose the will to abortion by disclosing a fittingness between the sacrament and forgoing abortion.

⁵⁷ MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, 6–7.

⁵⁸ Resolution 1994–A054.

But not only does the Eucharist redirect the moral imagination away from abortion, it also removes the tactics of anger, fear, hatred, or coercion by teaching communicants to view one another with charity, compassion, and mutual desire. No longer are other people seen as enemies to be overcome or pawns to be manipulated; they are beloved brothers and sisters, members of the same body. The other is not to be intimidated or resented, but rather to be welcomed, embraced, and loved. As the church finds itself constantly allured by the siren song of power, and tempted to deal with its problems and those of the world on the world's terms, God beckons it forward into a future free from sensationalist rhetoric and prepackaged enmities; a future of peace and joy; a future of faith, hope, and love. In this future, no one will hold onto one's own body, nor manipulate it for one's own ends, nor dictate what others do with their bodies, because all bodies will be joyfully given and received, after the pattern established by Christ, and opening up to us the very nature of the triune God, who will be all in all. No one will speculate or argue about the beginning or ending of life, because new and unending life will have just begun. And though a cursory glance at the state of affairs would indicate that this future could never be more than a pipedream, each Sunday, in parishes all around the world, God ushers this future in by the inauspicious means of bread and wine.

