

**Theology of Blessing and the Sacraments**  
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**Evangelists' Conference, 29 January 2010**

I offer these remarks in honor of the blessed memory of Paul Booth, former President of this Quorum, and of the minister and theologian Edward Schillebeeckx, Dominican, who died just before Christmas. Both taught me so much about blessing and the sacraments.

Community of Christ developed in the frontier culture of the United States, where conditions encouraged placing value on self-reliance, pulling oneself up by the bootstraps, and rugged individualism. This deep-seated complex of attitudes can make it difficult to hear the good news of the Gospel. Theological reflection in this context must therefore stress the core motif of grace again and again and again. This is particularly necessary when we consider blessing, which is almost a synonym of grace, and the sacraments, which concretely mediate grace to us. Blessing and the sacraments place emphasis not on earning merit or on the actions of humans, but on freely received gifts and abundant generosity that do not primarily benefit individuals but instead powerfully reconstitute us as communal beings made in the image of the Triune God, reintegrating us into the web of life.

As I meditated on our theme the immortal words of Robert Robinson came to me: “Come thou Fount of every blessing, Tune my heart to sing thy grace; Streams of mercy, never ceasing, Call for songs of loudest praise” (HS 31, to John Wyeth’s beautiful melody). Blessing is, quite simply, what God does, not in occasional and isolated ways, but perpetually, constantly, as expression of the divine character, as constitutive of Yahweh’s very being. I John tells us, after all, that “God is love.” In Paul Booth’s words,

“God is a God of blessing...God is committed to life.” Our dearly departed brother understood that the entire scriptural record bears testimony to this reality in cosmic and historical terms. God always yearns to achieve what is best for the entire creation. In prayer our Jewish sisters and brothers rightly define blessing as “more life.” Christians testify that Jesus came to bring life, and life in abundance (John 10).

I wish to suggest, then, that it is not strictly correct to suggest that we humans “offer a blessing.” God perpetually and freely showers all of creation with love and concern. God doesn’t need us to ask for a blessing. God knows beforehand what we need and has passionately been at work to bring fulfillment, healing, meaning, restoration of relationships, genuine community, and the realization of our true destiny.

Since yesterday was the feast day of the great medieval theologian and mystic Thomas Aquinas, we might use an Aristotelian distinction to suggest that we are never the “primary cause” of blessing—only God is. But part of the wonder of the divine Blesser is manifest in the fact that God graciously invites us to participate in the process of blessing. And so we are privileged to be “instrumental causes,” or the occasions, channels, instruments, midwives through which the reality of blessing becomes manifest in the concrete embodied lives of created beings. God is lovingly indulgent and permits us to ask for blessings—even though God already knows, and far better than we, what is needed. Paul tells us that the Spirit prays in, with, and through us. As we mature in the spiritual life, we come to realize that prayer is really much more about listening than speaking. We then learn to be silent so that we may detect the subtle, gently loving actions of God at work in the world, the still small voice, and align ourselves with the divine purpose. God does give us the choice to respond freely to grace already set in

motion. What a blessing it is to align ourselves with the Spirit's initiative and to take part in the divine work of love! We are blessed to be vehicles of God's blessing. But the focus must ever be not on us, these earthen vessels entrusted with treasures, but on the source, the "Fount of every blessing."

As brothers Booth and Schillebeeckx knew so well, for Christians these realities come to a definitive focal point in the life and work of Jesus of Nazareth, who we proclaim to be the Christ. As a human being like us, Jesus discerned God's will and fully devoted himself to a life of service, becoming a channel of grace that embraced all who were marginalized, hurting, and despised—women, the sick, the possessed, tax collectors, prostitutes. From the earliest writings of the New Testament onward Christians have proclaimed that "God was in Christ reconciling the world to the divine self." We rejoice that God so loves this fragile and broken creation that God entered fully in solidarity with us. Henceforth the divine is never separated from material reality. Immanuel, God is with us, ever blessing, ever blessed. God has hallowed the ordinary, the every day. In and through the life of Jesus, the Blesser declared, to quote Paul Booth, that "love is the force that supports the entire world...[God] accepts and blesses humankind unconditionally." Jesus' acts of indiscriminate, promiscuous blessing led to his cruel death by torture on the empire's cross. But by raising him again God insisted that "life...holds the last word on human destiny." Nothing can ultimately block the constant flow of God's shower of blessings.

In honor of the hundreds of thousands of persons who have perished and are in pain right next door in Haiti, we must ask how such realities square with the massive suffering of the innocent. I'd like to explore this vital topic more in my follow up class.

Suffice it to say for now that what happened to our precious neighbors was in no way, shape or form God's will—much less God's punishment. Those who have suggested otherwise utter blasphemies. They apparently worship a God of wrath who bears no resemblance at all to the *abba* of Jesus. While I do not pretend to understand the deep mysteries of creation or its vast source, I am absolutely confident that God is intimately present with every human soul in Haiti, with every victim and every person bringing relief. God mourns with those who have lost loved ones or sustained injuries, and God is calling on all of us to be channels of blessing that strive to align ourselves with the divine purpose of rebuilding a just and prosperous nation for all Haitians.

Paul Booth was clear eyed about the reality of evil and suffering in our world. He sought to remind us that the Gospel never promised us a rose garden or nothing but “smooth sailing.” We live in the ups and downs of history and creation, but God unconditionally offers us the “assurance of relationship.”

Having delineated God's constant blessing in all the cosmos and all of history, let us now explore how the sacraments bring this reality into stark relief for the benefit of humankind. In the classical formulation of Augustine, sacraments are “visible signs of invisible grace.” Charles Neff used to call them “God's audio-visuals.” While they certainly demand a response from us, it is far more important to recognize what God is doing in them, how God is blessing us and reminding us of the constancy and totality of the divine Blesser's nature. For Schillebeeckx sacraments were occasion for meetings or encounters with God. They always point back to Jesus as the fundamental sacrament of God's presence. We observe them because our Lord did. Sacraments display a

Christological focus. In baptism, we are marked as Christ's own. In the Lord's supper, we take and eat and drink Christ's body and blood given for us.

Moreover, the sacraments re-constitute us as Christ's body. They lie at the very heart of the essence and mission of the church. In baptism we are embraced and welcomed into Christ's community. In the Lord's supper, we share one bread and one cup, recognizing that we are each parts of Christ's one body, called to be his voice, feet, and hands in this world. In elements and gestures the sacraments proclaim the same good news we are called to proclaim in our interpretation of God's Word. In many ways the church shares tasks performed, often even better, by other human social organizations—fostering fellowship and serving the community. The powerfully effective combination of Word and Sacrament, however, is left solely to the church. Whatever else we do, we cannot neglect or fail to fully appreciate the importance of sacramentally aligning ourselves with God's work of blessing. Recent counsel to the church calls us to deepen our understanding and reverent practice of the sacraments as special, indeed indispensable channels to heighten human awareness of the constant presence of the Blessor.

Sacraments, then, powerfully bring to our awareness the grace of God and the divine desire to constantly bless all of creation. As extra-ordinary events in the life of the church, sacraments paradoxically show us the ordinariness and every day constancy of blessing. Don't we wash, eat, and drink daily? Isn't baptismal water just common water, Eucharistic bread like all bread, and wine run of the mill grape juice? Yet in, with, and through these very familiar elements God unites us with Christ and with one another as Christ's body. By means of the regular stuff of creation God restores, pardons, and

transforms us. Once we grasp this fact we are on the way to achieving the goal sought by all mystics, namely constant awareness of God's unfailing presence. By relishing the ordinary, God's sacramental work spurs us to pray without ceasing. For what is prayer but the practice of an intimate relationship with God expressed in every moment and dimension of our lives? We must help our people progress toward a mature spirituality that does not focus on the spectacular times—reunions, communion Sundays, even evangelists' blessings—but realizes that our true call is to encounter God always, everywhere. At its best our faith tradition recaptured the profound biblical insight that the material and the spiritual are not separate or opposed at all. As the incarnation demonstrated once and for all times, God has entered into full solidarity with the created order. Every place, however plain, however sordid, even, has been hallowed by God's constant presence. We must become adept at spotting God's grace everywhere, and aligning ourselves with the Spirit's invisible but powerful movement in the whole world.

In conclusion, may I as an outsider share some reflections about what these general comments about blessing and the sacraments might imply for the sacrament of the evangelist's blessing? I remember when brother Alex Kahtava shared my call to seventy with me. I just could not picture myself as a street preacher or door knocker. I had profound misgiving about the whole enterprise of proselytizing. Alex taught me that missionary work was really a task of the whole church. The seventy are called to symbolize this reality, to serve as a sign of this call to the whole body. So I was pleased to hear dear Paul Booth use similar terms in reference to the order of evangelists, calling its members signs of blessings.

I would like to suggest, then, that the evangelist's blessing is a type of prayer offered rarely in order to remind us of the sort of prayer we should all be engaged in constantly and continually. Prayers, of course, play a central role in all of the sacraments. They are the vehicle for human participation in blessing. Jean Calvin said that in fact daily prayer is the means by which we receive daily blessings. For him God bids us speak and ask so that we put our faith in words. My excellent mentor at Emory, Don Saliers, always told us that if we developed a theology that couldn't be expressed in the form of a good prayer, we needed to start over. Prayer, then, is a form of thinking out loud that deepens our awareness of God's gracious nature and purpose. But recall that speaking is only one side of the exchange of prayer, and probably the lesser part. Since prayers are the conversations that develop our relationship with God, we must learn to humbly listen, to let God speak. Only in this way can we detect the divine purpose, and align ourselves with it. Only contemplative prayer can prepare us to be instruments of God's grace.

Evangelists have the unique call and awesome responsibility of communicating what they have heard God say in always fragile and imperfect yet necessary human words. Paul Booth knew that this is the prophetic task. Unfortunately many still think of prophetic ministers as fortune tellers. Of course we may well discern the sorts of consequences likely to follow if present trends continue. But the future is not our concern. We trustingly leave it in God's hands, comforted by the promise that in spite of all God will bring history to fulfillment in the peaceable reign. No, the prophetic voice points to God as the source of all blessing, and calls on humans to respond to grace by aligning their lives with divine purpose.

As our reflections on the sacraments disclosed, in Christian community sharing God's Word always directs persons to center on Jesus Christ. Evangelist's blessings, too, must have Christological focus. For us the divine Blesser's nature and design is most clearly expressed in the revelation of God in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. And as one of the church's sacraments, these blessings are not for individual edification but must serve to build up the whole body. Persons should see that they are called to accept their particular call as part of the institution, the church, called to continue and expand Christ's work in the world, on behalf of the blessing of all of creation. Moreover, the very special event of the evangelist's blessing must inspire persons to encounter God regularly in their day to day work and life. The extraordinary must hallow the ordinary.

I am deeply grateful for this opportunity of sharing with this great order. Yours is a most wonderful call! May you be richly blessed as you faithfully respond to God's constant free initiative. May I conclude by joining in prayer with you and for you?

Almighty God, the giver of all good gifts, in your divine providence you have appointed various orders in your Church: Give your grace, we humbly pray, to all who are now called to the order of evangelist in ministry for your people; and so fill them with truth and clothe them with love, that they may faithfully serve you, to the glory of your great Name and for the benefit of your holy Church; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from The Book of Common Prayer (Seabury Press, 1979), 256.