



## **Postcolonially Bittersweet in America: Ecojustice and Sacramental Agency<sup>1</sup>**

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As I trotted around San Diego International Airport looking for my flight departure gate a few months ago, my cell phone slipped out of the pocket, bounced, rolled, and finally landed underneath a huge poster. While retrieving the phone I was suddenly drawn to the question that stared at me in white-on-blue words: “How many lightbulbs does it take to change an

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<sup>1</sup> I presented an earlier and much shorter version of this article under the title of “Bittersweet: Resisting Ecological Hopelessness Through Sacramental Agency” at SECSOR Annual Meeting in Atlanta, GA, March 5, 2012. I was able to work on this essay thanks to Xavier University Summer Fellowship for which I remain grateful.

American?” And then, I could not help but stare back at the next question on the poster simply because it felt like a pedagogical *déjà vu* of facing the particularly disquieting FAQ that inevitably bubbles up sooner or later when discussion of theology and environmental crisis comes up in my college classroom. “It’s no joke,” I read on the purplish poster by Nature.org. “Climate change is a critical issue for all life on Earth.” And then the punch-line: “But can the actions of one individual really make a difference?”

It’s no joke, indeed, since today this particular question is often deeply embedded in all candid reflection on environmental crisis and all remedial steps that one can take. Can you and I really make a difference living here in America? What kind of agency is desirable, feasible, and sustainable *vis-à-vis* the present course of global environmental affairs that my colleague Elizabeth Groppe recently described as “tipping toward catastrophe?”<sup>2</sup> What kind of answers can a theologian give to the above question – not solely for the sake of heuristic argument in an inquisitive contemporary North American university classroom but, above all, rooted in a real-world and “down-to-earth” theological veracity? What kind of theological envisagement of agency would be capable of resisting outright fatalism but also facile simplification and pious platitudes? I pose these questions in light of my observations as a college professor working in an environment where university students frequently express a sense of deep ambivalence, sometimes even resignation and hopelessness, about the impact of their personal beliefs and behaviors as consumers, citizens, and believers in response to the environmental crisis. Do our

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<sup>2</sup> Elizabeth Groppe, “Climate Change: A Life Issue,” *America: The National Catholic Weekly*, December 12, 2011, available at: [www.americamagazine.org](http://www.americamagazine.org). Retrieved December 13, 2011.

attempts to live and act with environmental responsibility generate genuinely transformative effects, i.e., do they render the desired “difference” regarding eco-social justice?

Our present ecojustice crisis is a stupendously complex and humbling challenge. As I write this essay, many “low hopes”<sup>3</sup> and “recreation of failures”<sup>4</sup> headlines from the Rio+ 20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 in Brazil littered my browsing history amidst tweets about the censorship of the 80 page central negotiating text and climate advocates’ walkout. World Health Organization is warning that climate change is expected to worsen hunger, especially in the poor areas of the world, by as much as 20% within a decade.<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, in the town of Mayflower, Arkansas, barrels of toxic tar sands are running down the streets after an ExxonMobile oil pipeline burst open on March 29, 2013 amidst triumphant reports that the North American energy industry is booming.

From a theological perspective, it is salient to ask: what conceptions of human – but also divine – agency could engender a fruitful theological imaginary within our current predicament based upon a livable amount of realism? What follows is a reflection of a rather circumspect theological mindscape facing the bluntly practical and sorely lingering question about the

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<sup>3</sup> “Rio Summit kicks off with low hopes,” *New Zealand Herald*, July 22, 2012 at: [http://www.nzherald.co.nz/environment/news/article.cfm?c\\_id=39&objectid=10814597](http://www.nzherald.co.nz/environment/news/article.cfm?c_id=39&objectid=10814597). The highly praised prime minister of Australia Julia Gillard is quoted to have admonished that “I’m not going to stand here and pretend what is in that text is going to make some indelible mark on the world’s history from tomorrow on.”

<sup>4</sup> Fiona Harvey, “Rio+20 makes no fresh, green breast of the new world,” *The Guardian Blog*, June 25, 2012 at: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/blog/2012/jun/25/rio-20-great-gatsby>

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Koch, “Climate change to worsen hunger as U.N.’s Rio+20 begins,” *USA Today*, June 20, 2012 at <http://content.usatoday.com/communities/greenhouse/post/2012/06/climate-change-expected-to-worsen-hunger-as-rio20-begins/1#.T-OKKPXNm7I>.

meaning, scope, and performative efficacy (or the perceived lack thereof) of realistic yet genuinely transformative agency.

Once more with a feeling: “But can the actions of one individual really make a difference?” Is an affirmative answer feasible with a livable amount of intellectual integrity and theological prudence? The affirmative answer that I am about to venture is, with all due existential urgency, not a fervent “yes” but a somewhat bittersweet, a somewhat heedful, “perhaps.” It is a “perhaps” that is best characterized by what Karl Rahner intriguingly called “pessimistic realism.”<sup>6</sup> The pessimistically realistic “perhaps” is theologically feasible – sacramentally speaking. And so the proposition of this essay is that in our late postmodern/postcolonial era, a meaningful and transformative agency is rooted, discerned, and performed sacramentally. But what does the crucial qualifier “sacramental” entail in the postmodern/postcolonial milieu? I propose that the sacramental is can most fruitfully be conceived in the following five ways: as incremental, voluntary, longanimous, chaoplexic, and opaque. It is these “five ways,” I submit, that characterize the epiphanies of sacramental agency most meaningfully in today’s postcolonial G-Zero world of sweeping inequity and uncertainty.

The itinerary I pursue here is doubtlessly perspectival with all the pertinent limitations while aspiring toward transdisciplinarity of vision. All the while, it is merely one route among other possible, perhaps far more cheerful, routes with their own cartographies of interlocutors, practicality, integrity, and theological adequacy.

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<sup>6</sup> Karl Rahner, *Foundations of Faith* (New York: A Crossroad Book, 1978): 404.

## Agency, Not a Joke

A growing chorus of Christian theological voices is urging us to recognize the profound connection between the present environmental crisis and spiritual crisis. A widening ecumenical consensus is emerging, at least in some Christian circles locally, regionally and globally, that the current ecological challenges are not merely and purely economic or technological.<sup>7</sup> The present cultural and theological context indicates that many people, including North American college students whose persistent questions have ignited a desire to distill my sacramental musings, are fairly well-aware of the growing environmental problems. At the same time there is a habitual failure to fully and independently recognize the crucial links between people's personal ecological attitudes and their consumer practices as directly related to their theological/spiritual outlook. Failure to recognize this linkage in itself constitutes, I submit, the most aggressive contemporary theological and pastoral challenge of the late postmodern modern Western Christianity *tout court*. At its core, the chronic disconnect reveals one of the deepest wounds of sacramental imaginary. In other words, the present postmodern and postcolonial ecojustice crisis is fundamentally a sacramental crisis.

The challenge resides on a truly planetary level. Historically, the origins of ecological mutilation and its socio-economic underpinnings are substantially interlinked with the unfolding of the Western colonial modernity. Under the auspices of the emerging formations of neo-liberal

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<sup>7</sup> For example, the Interfaith Network for Earth Concerns (<http://www.emoregon.org>) and even closer to home, GrassRoots Ecumenical Environmental Network active on Facebook; there have also developed influential, even magisterial, theological convergences (<http://www.patriarchate.org/environment/declarations>) between the Roman Catholic Church (Popes John Paul II, Benedict XVI as well as the newly elected Francis) and the Eastern Orthodox Church (The "Green" Patriarch Bartholomew); The World Council of Churches promotes eco-justice through various ecumenical projects such as Climate Justice, Ecumenical Water Network – among other initiatives.

globalization, however, the predicament is being amplified and ethically problematized by the new postcolonial economic powerhouse societies such as China, India, and Brazil aspiring to level off and topple the Western economic hegemony in the emergent polycentric world.<sup>8</sup> In these circumstances, there is no such thing as a purely environmental challenge; all environmental challenges are irrevocably and simultaneously challenges of ecosocial justice, and thus, at least implicitly, of an irrevocably spiritual nature.

Every time I raise the theme of environmental crisis through its theo-ethical, economic, political and spiritual connotations in class, there is a group of students who, with varying degrees of candor and exasperation, express their opinion that they do not see how anything that they might do as an individual or a single family unit will make any lasting positive difference to the climate change conundrum or eradicate human trafficking, child labor, and destructive farming and industrial practices among many other hideous realities. Once a student gloomily asked me at the very end of a class if I really believed that even if she personally bought sustainably grown and fairly traded products and even if it helped one child to go to school in Africa rather than toil in the cocoa plantations, what difference would it make for the multitudes of children and families who had no other options? In other words, if the problems loom so large and the perceived effect of one's agency appears to be so negligible, what kind of difference is

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<sup>8</sup> The so-called “developing” world leaders and their constituents are calling again for the “developed,” mostly Western old powers, to take on the historic responsibility to take initiative and make deeper sacrifices to prevent environmental disaster. Obviously, the issue of this specifically postcolonial issue of justice has never failed so far to divide the global community and generate political deadlock. On the latest manifestation of it in Rio de Janeiro see Bradley Brooks, “Leaders raise alarm at Rio+2 enviro summit,” *US News*, July 21, 2012, at [www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/06/21/leaders-raise-alarm-at-rio20-enviro-summit](http://www.usnews.com/news/articles/2012/06/21/leaders-raise-alarm-at-rio20-enviro-summit).

being achieved if any? Also, if the difference being made is so sporadic and fleeting, is it worth the effort and investment of an already economically struggling North American individual?

Young people are often genuinely worried that even if they are fully aware of the ethical exigencies of their ethico-spiritual vision, their transformative economic agency is constrained up to the point where they have difficulty realistically imagining as to how they could practically embody the values of environmental responsibility as a consumer – be that acquiring a fuel-efficient car, buying locally or organically grown vegetables and meat, or supporting fair trade coffee growers, or purchasing foil or toilet paper made from recycled materials. All of the above carry the added price tag that is obvious to any shopper. For many, even among the so-called “First World” urban dwellers, buying these products consistently is or appears to be beyond their economic reach. That, in turn, generates the perception that sustainable living is an elitist project. Thus it is not really surprising that the perception of agency by younger people – and they are by far not alone carrying around this feeling – often suggests a certain self-attributed subalternity in terms of economic and political inhibitions when it comes to envisioning feasible and sustainable solutions to systemic problems that threaten the very viability and dignity of human wellbeing. To step even further back, it is not just young people’s environmental and ethical agency but also their imagination comes forth as subdued. Imagination appears constrained into an apprehensive mode of increasingly elusive personal success as the single overarching aspiration. According to my observations, it is often paired with a genuinely well-intentioned yet manifestly individualistic affirmation of mostly reactive, impulsive, and non-systemic charitable activity. At the same time, the remaining youthful idealism is being gnarled by the everyday grind of the

pure and ruthless economic reason so deeply ingrained in the platitudes of the reigning global neo-liberal capitalism.

On the other hand, occasionally there comes along a brutally honest student response such as the opening lines of a paper on green energy that a fellow academic recently shared (without disclosing the identity of the author) on Facebook. His students were asked to reflect on an article about green energy and the following lines were part of the response: “This piece was saying some really good things. I’m not about to sit here and act like I care about the world because I really don’t maybe because I’m still young and don’t have to worry about those types of problems right now.” It is prudent to wonder, at least occasionally, how many young people (and others) really think this way yet write “politically correct” papers that mention all the supposedly “correct” and “feel-good” things about sustainability and environmental responsibility?

Regardless of the level of optimism about the impact and meaning (fullness/lessness) of one’s actions vis-à-vis the growing global climate crisis, the notion of agency refers to, according to Laura Ahearn’s description, “the socioculturally mediated capacity to act.”<sup>9</sup> As Ahearn explains, this is a rather unspecific definition yet it appears to be spacious enough to properly underscore both the individuality and collectivity of human agency. What needs to be underscored even further, is the pivotal role of the economic component of agency. The unnamed economic dimension traverses and influences all the other aspects that she commendably interrogates. Hence it needs to be explicitly acknowledged and not just tacitly implied if the

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<sup>9</sup> Laura M. Ahearn, “Language and Agency,” *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 30 (2001):112.



agency in question is to remain existentially engaged and embodied in addition to the other, more discursive and linguistic, specificities that provides a considerable spectrum of variables:

For example, where is agency located? Must agency be human, individual, collective, intentional, or conscious? Some studies of agency reinforce received notions about western atomic individualism, while others deny agency to individuals, attributing it instead only to discourses or social forces.<sup>10</sup>

It seems that the most useful way of understanding agency is to acknowledge its structural and relational “catholicity.” Namely, agency is comprised of, implicated in, and manifested through the performative and imaginative vectors of all of the above variables even though all of them may not be engaged equally strongly or simultaneously in any given action. That, of course, does not minimize the even broader critical questions about the modern (i.e., colonial) Western dualistic anthropocentrism of agency as postcolonial ecocritics have pointed out.<sup>11</sup> What cannot be forgotten is that regardless of the type of agency (individual, social, forced, conscious, etc.) or its interactive context (culture, politics, religion, etc.), there is always an (dis)empowerment differential that resolutely shapes its self-perception, exercise, and efficacy.

As final point: for human agency to be meaningful and practically beneficial it should be radical in the deeply material sense of generating transformation instead of merely performing feel-good busywork. Here I refer to the postcolonial theorist Anjali Prabhu’s advocacy for a

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<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 130.

<sup>11</sup> Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin, *Postcolonial Ecocriticism: Literature, Animals, Environment* (London: Routledge, 2010). See particularly Ch. 3.

radical conception of agency which “must be tied to social change in which some inequality or injustice is addressed.”<sup>12</sup> In the context of environmental crisis, with all its presently felt ecosocial and moral injustices and the ones yet to come mostly upon those of us least able to cope, it is hard to imagine a sustainable agency that does not at least show a minimal promise to body forth a felt material change in our earthling lives and environments. In other words, radically meaningful and fruitful human agency – and it must be such at least sporadically to be attractive and sustainable – cannot be too radically eschatological, too drastically “not yet.” There is a need for at least a precarious “earthly” foretaste of the “already” at some point along the way even if it appears a bit tasteless for certain Western postmodern postures of infinite deferral. Environmentally responsive and responsible agency cannot last if it is too heavenly, too otherworldly, too deferred, too juxtapositional, and even too stoic. In that case it would rehash the unholy Christendom trope of disembodied transcendence that can only mystically seduce toward hyperspiritualized heaven through the belittlement of earthly bodies, both biotic and abiotic.

Additionally, as the postcolonial critic Simone Bignall has recently argued, constructive postcolonial human agency cannot thrive solely on the basis of felt negativity – lack, inadequacy, and strife. Rather, truly transformative practices require a “positive joyful engagement” toward “joyful sociability.”<sup>13</sup> After all, how would we really know what to aspire to without a “catholic,”

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<sup>12</sup> Anjali Prabhu, *Hybridity: Limits, Transformations, Prospects* (Albany: State University of New York, 2007):2.

<sup>13</sup> Simone Bignall, *Postcolonial Agency: Critique and Constructivism* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010): 237. The postcolonial joyful sociability is premised upon the politics of friendship and respectful listening that is based on “complex recognition, consent and continuity” (236-237).

i.e., a complex sensually and intelligibly felt foretaste of the very thing we want to be part of and work toward? It is here that the sacramental discourse with its trademark semi-clarities<sup>14</sup> of insight, experience, and desire might prove useful.

### **Sacramentality: Engodding Interface**

On the one hand, the very notion of sacramentality – or in Alexander Schmemmann’s words “the sacramental itself” and “the sacramental character in the whole of life”<sup>15</sup> – can provide an innovative wholistic and open-ended way of conceiving empowerment, relationality, and agency. On the other hand, given how counterintuitive and offensive the notion of sacramentality can be for a thoroughly modern disenchanting mindset, appeals to sacramentality may seem to lead to a preemptive dead-end. How can sacramentality be conceived beyond both suspicions of gullibility and swooning New-Agey sentimentality?

Sacramentality is an imaginary that historically has been of profound importance in Christian theology. It has been particularly relevant in those manifestations of theological vision that have been most significantly influenced by Neo-Platonic ontology of participation. Ontologies and epistemologies of participation perceive the world as an order of signification through which the divine reality can be sensed, perceived, experienced in all natural entities.

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<sup>14</sup> Jean-Luc Marion has referred to the order of sacramental signification and revelation as “semi-clarity” in his essay “The Invisibility of the Saint,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 (2009):709. I do not share the radically contrastive views of Marion regarding the invisibility of holiness that seem to undermine the very interface of revelation and redemption that sacramentality entails. Yet Marion’s caution toward the opacity of revelation is an important reminder of the necessity to be on guard against the temptation for idolatrous transparency.

<sup>15</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, “The World as Sacrament,” *Church, World, Mission: Reflection on Orthodoxy in the West* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 1979): 220, 218.

Sacramental imaginary conceives of a “mysterious connection between Creator and creation.”<sup>16</sup>

Sacramentality articulates a relational interface across the ontological divide, an interface between the uncreated and the created realities, in such a way that, in Elizabeth Theokritoff’s words, “God’s creative energies are echoed and reflected in all that he has made.”<sup>17</sup> The notion of sacramentality perceives and communicates the material, interpersonal, experiential and imaginative space. Within this space the interplay of presence and absence, knowledge and unknowing, unity and diversity, activity and receptivity, sight and sound, taste and touch, identity and difference, visibility and invisibility, death and resurrection, desire and fulfillment unfolds in a contrapuntal synergy of divinity and humanity. Sacramentality connotes the threshold space rooted in or, better yet, ontologically suspended, in divine generosity and its “oblique but perennial presence of grace.”<sup>18</sup>

The Eastern Orthodox sacramental cosmology and ontology underscore that all matter – not just the material elements that are used in the official Christian sacramental liturgies, such as water, bread, wine, oil – all matter, that is, entails the theologically intrinsic “Godwardness”<sup>19</sup> – its revelatory sacramental quality that signifies and conveys divine generosity and an immensely complex purposiveness. If so, the sacramental imaginary lays a strong, theologically grounded,

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<sup>16</sup> Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation: Orthodox Perspectives on Ecology* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2009):168.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 169.

<sup>18</sup> John O’Donohue, “The sacraments – disappearing wells? A sketch towards a theology of the sacraments,” in *Spirituality and Sacramentality: The Way Supplement* 94 (1999): 49.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 181.

ethical claim upon our attitudes, actions and reactions toward material reality and the ways how we use material things.

Sacramental imaginary is also an eschatological imaginary: the “Godwardness” of material creation, including human beings, opens up the possibility of “transvaluating the world”<sup>20</sup> – as Georges Florovsky put it. “Transvaluation” is not interventionist and coercive; it does not abolish the structures and inherent value of the world but rather emphasizes its capacity and indeed, its vocation, for cosmic transfiguration. Cosmic transfiguration of all created reality toward an ever growing and ever more complex likeness of and union with divinity – *theosis* or “engodding” to use theological shorthand – does not annihilate human history and agency. It does not purge or overrule the material integrity and intricacy of the eco-systems and structures on our planet. “Transvaluation” denotes an augmentative and remedial trajectory of restoration and fruition through revealing a “new meaning and a new value”<sup>21</sup> of the whole reality. To be transvalued sacramentally is to be transformed through a curative perfecting agency of grace – or divine energies as the Eastern Orthodox would probably put it – without coercion, deprivation, and competition.

Furthermore, “transvaluation” is what liturgy in its truest and deepest sense is meant to initiate and perform – “to transform the entire world, to the least of our brothers and sisters, as well as to the last speck of dust.”<sup>22</sup> The rightful space of liturgy is nothing less than the whole

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<sup>20</sup> Georges Florovsky, “The Church: Her Nature and Task,” in *Bible, Church, Tradition: An Eastern Orthodox View*, The Collected Works of Georges Florovsky, vol. 1 (Belmont, MA: Nordland Publishing, 1972): 68.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Light Through Darkness: The Orthodox Tradition* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004):45.

world in the fullness of its natural, political, psychological, economic, ethical, and aesthetical dimensions. The Orthodox radically sacramental imaginary envisions the whole world as an iconic sign and as a sacramental mystery of the perfectly relational (triune) God. From this perspective, in the zesty words of John Cryssavgis, “the eternal infests and invests the historical. Nothing is ever profane within this vision; nothing whatsoever is neutral. Everything is an icon revealing God and indicates a way to God. The whole world is a ‘cosmic liturgy’ ...”<sup>23</sup> Lastly, such “transvaluation” suggests an order of life and representation wherein, to use the Augustinian parlance, the teleologies and axiologies of *uti* and *frui* radically intermingle.

But of course today it is a risky intellectual wager to draw upon the discourse of sacramentality with its traditional pedigree in the premodern participatory ontologies despite the seismic shifts that quantum physics and a spectrum of chaos theories have produced in the most advanced segments of our knowledge about the universe we inhabit. It is no accident that the hallmark of the Western colonial modernity is precisely disenchantment. Hence, as Regina Mara Schwartz summarizes, “sacramental thinking is completely alien to the way modern secularism has conceived matter, space, time, and language, in a sense it had to be almost dismantled for modernism to be born.”<sup>24</sup> And so the critiques of sacramental imaginary today range from a remarkably “ecumenical” technocratic nihilism to the conscientious Western Christian concerns about quasi-pantheistic and the implications of sacramentality (as distinct from the determined official sacraments of various Christian traditions) in the ominous postmodern and New Agey

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 47.

<sup>24</sup> Regina Mara Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008):11

soft-focus religiosity and loss of definition.<sup>25</sup> These critical perspectives argue that to discuss sacramentality through a more general theology of creation rather than specific theologies of redemption seems to advance an Christological and hermeneutical error as far as theological method is concerned.<sup>26</sup>

That having been said, another issue seems to be more relevant today than the above debate. While more than one point of methodological departure is possible and justifiable in sacramental discourses and while the definitions of what a sacrament is or shouldn't be also vary quite a bit, the pivotal and still acutely lingering modern issue is the competitive fissure between our experience of the world and the perception of God. The Orthodox tradition – among others – is not oblivious of this historico-cultural fact. As David Bentley Hart has put it so aptly:

The world we inhabit—the world our imaginations know and within which our deepest desires must move—is the world after Darwin [...] we simply cannot now (if we are paying attention) imagine a universe whose grandeurs and mysteries unambiguously lead the reflective mind beyond themselves towards a transcendent order both benign and provident [...] But in an age such as ours... the call of transcendence [is] more elusive of interpretation, like a voice heard in a dream. In the absence of that scale of shining mediations that once seemed seamlessly to unite the immanent and the transcendent, the earthly and the heavenly, nature and supernature, we are nevertheless still open to the same summons issued in every age to every soul; but it must for now come to us as something more mysterious, tragic, and terrible than it once was.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>25</sup> See, for example, John Macquarrie, *A Guide to the Sacraments* (New York: Continuum, 1998): 36-37.

<sup>26</sup> These critiques originate mostly within Protestant circles in relation to the memorialist theories of sacramental representation. A helpful concise exposition of this approach can be found in Jane Williams, "Hints and rumours of the Living God," in *Spirituality and Sacramentality: The Way Supplement 94* (1999): 111-120, among other voices.

<sup>27</sup> David Bentley Hart, "The Gnostic Turn," *First Things*, July 27, 2009. Available at: <http://www.firstthings.com/onthesquare/2009/07/the-gnostic-turn/david-b-hart>. Retrieved April 12, 2012.

While the short-and-long term outcomes of the sacramental approach cannot be readily measured, I do rely on the attractive power (or maybe I should be more blunt and say, positively seductive power) that still pertains to the elusive and mysterious sacramental signs. As John Hart has defined sacraments, they “are signs of the creating Spirit that *draw* people into grace-filled moments permeated by a heightened awareness of divine presence and engagement with divine Being.”<sup>28</sup> As such, Hart argues, sacrament in the broadest sense of the term can “be both a sign and a stimulus.”<sup>29</sup> The stimulus aspect of sacramental things and actions constitutes a locus of hope since it may prompt to “explore more fully the intricacies of the universe, Earth, and living communities and to seek more in-depth relational bonds.”<sup>30</sup> After all, the present era of globalization, whatever other loaded economic and political variables it may denote, is characterized by a (sometimes frighteningly) growing awareness of planetary relationality and interdependence not just economically and culturally, but above all ecosocially. Understanding and constructively modulating the planetary relational matrix and the structures of interdependence through sacramental imaginary and agency can at least reactualize a mindscape and hopefully also an actionscape that go beyond the sheer utilitarian chase of endless growth of profit, productivity, and inequitably distributed wealth to appease any self-aggrandizing human desire.

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<sup>28</sup> John Hart, *Sacramental Commons: Christian Ecological Ethics* (Lanham and Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2006): xiv.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*



To sum up: “Sacramentality means that things matter and that matter is not just a thing.”<sup>31</sup> Above all else, sacraments are relational and synergistic events – interactions, interpenetrations, interplays, intermutations – wherein the created and the uncreated realities co-create, give and take, heal and grow together so that the ultimate *sacrum convivium* can obtain – that God may indwell all in all through Christ and in the Holy Spirit (1 Cor. 15:28). As the broader interface of suffering and redemption, sacramentality is a borderscape where divine, natural, and human agencies interact, and occasionally intertwine in a way that can be seen, heard, and felt as graceful, even as transfigurative.

### **Sacramentality: A Verb of Action**

The constructive and emancipatory potential of sacramental imaginary to initiate an ecosocial *metanoia* has already been highlighted by quite a few theological voices in the Christian theological milieu. Jame Schaefer, for example, has reflected quite meticulously on the difficulties involved in the process of sacramental “transvaluation” due to the widely discrepant epistemological sensibilities between the patristic and medieval sacramental visions and the modern, scientifically informed, patterns of knowing, feeling, and acting in the world. Despite the imaginative leaps that might appear rather daunting to those who still intellectually inhabit the dualistic world of modern mechanistic science, Schaefer underscores the promise of re-constructive efforts to rekindle sacramental sensibilities in the contemporary intellectual culture

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<sup>31</sup> Kevin Irwin, *Models of the Eucharist* (New York and Mahwah: Paulist Press, 2005): 43.

of quantum physics and evolutionary biology. The sacramental sensibilities translate into a disposition of reverence, Schaefer argues:

When viewed from a sacramental perspective, individuals of species, communities of biota, ecosystems with their interconnected components, the entire biosphere, and the totality of the universe will be revered because they mediate God's presence and God's attributes.<sup>32</sup>

The disposition of reverence cannot be limited to an intellectual or cultural posture. It must translate into reverential behavior trajectories – namely, into “ongoing efforts to identify and combat forces that thwart opportunities to discern the sacramental quality of the world.”<sup>33</sup> It is here, in the context of pondering over the probability, feasibility, and possible practical incarnations of these “reverential behavior trajectories” (to ensure that the species and ecosystems can survive, serve their purpose, and continue to mediate divinity,) my concern emerges in relation to the felt hopelessness and agential inadequacy that my students routinely express about their perceived capacity – the lack thereof, to be more precise – to effect change through meaningful actions beyond merely conscience-quieting gestures or tactics of simple escapism. Even if some of us would be successful in our aspirations and efforts to entrain a deeply sacramental sensibility in us through the practice of “reverential behavior trajectories,” the question still lingers – will that really make a difference? Will the practice of such reverential behavior trajectories be ultimately useless beyond appeasing our own ascetic and moral proclivities – given that we are not currently seeing a green revolution on a scale that would be

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<sup>32</sup> Jame Schaefer, *Theological Foundations for Environmental Ethics: Reconstructing Patristic and Medieval Concepts* (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009): 83.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

appropriate *vis-à-vis* the sheer scope of the environmental challenge we face as a planetary community? What kind of transformative personal agency can we exercise in the absence of a globally shared political, cultural, and economic commitment to change? What kind of agency can be conceived as possible, useful, and meaningful? How can meaning be articulated visibly, practically – and by that I mean, in an embodied, sensate way? In a non-fideistic way? What kind of agency can we envision theologically and exercise realistically, materialistically, incarnationally, transfiguratively?

The theological answer is, all further elaborations notwithstanding, a profoundly materialistic one. But it is the “sublime,”<sup>34</sup> the “holy,”<sup>35</sup> or the “sacred”<sup>36</sup> materialism of a resolutely incarnational and sacramental imaginary of Christianity. The sublime materialism of sacramentality is not a decadent fideism. Nor is it a “camp” negative theology of self-denial without reserve, without pain thresholds, without enjoyment, without those perilous trans-fats in a real old-world cake. Sacramental materialism is far from the “spiritualized ivory tower”<sup>37</sup> where sacramental modes of perception and reasoning have frequently been exiled during the heyday of the Western colonial modernity. It is a sensibility and agency that fits in the landscape and “sensescape” – and not only mindscape or heartscape – of grace that, in James Empereur’s

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<sup>34</sup> Karl Rahner, “The Festival of the Future of the World,” *Theological Investigations* vol. 7 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1971):183.

<sup>35</sup> Alexander Schmemmann, “The World as Sacrament,” 221.

<sup>36</sup> Nikolaos Loudovikos, *A Eucharistic Ontology: Maximus the Confessor’s Eschatological Ontology of Being as Dialogical Reciprocity* (Elizabeth Theokritoff, trans.; Brookline, MA: Holy Cross Orthodox Press, 2010):225.

<sup>37</sup> Ola Tjorhom, *Embodied Faith: Reflections on a Materialist Spirituality* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2009): 87.

words, “always wants to become visible.”<sup>38</sup> Within the sacramental imaginary, as Ola Tjorhom puts it, “materialist spirituality emerges as a piety that smells freshly of earth and at the same time conveys a solid taste of heaven.”<sup>39</sup> Consequently, if, as Tjorhom argues, in the sacramental imaginary “grace is not invisible anymore... it can actually be seen and heard ... eaten and drunk,”<sup>40</sup> then sacramental agency, and its impact as well as its outcomes must have a palpable presence at least to a certain extent and at least sometimes.

Sacramental agency is not an intra-textual matter (so much for linguistic idealism!) or a matter of ghostly cerebral symbolism. Nor is it a transaction of pious interiority between God and soul alone that remains ever invisible, inaudible, and without any translation into the regimes of empirical perception (smell, taste, and touch) and ethico-political action. Quite on the contrary, and I say it with a dose of eschatological reserve, sacramental sensibility and sacramental agency as we experience it in this world operates in the arena of a constant migration between the semi-clarity and opacity of origins, objectives, processes, desires, accomplishments, individuals and communities.

### **Sacramental Agency: Five Ways**

What, then, characterizes sacramental agency? How can sacramental agency be envisioned and enacted today as both *realistic and sustainable*? I use these adjectives to underscore, perhaps in a somewhat cautious Thomistic fashion, the need to express theological

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<sup>38</sup> James Empeur, *Worship: Exploring the Sacred* (Washington DC: The Pastoral Press, 1987): 76.

<sup>39</sup> Thorhom, *Embodied Faith*, 21.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 87.

ideas in a way that takes seriously the *convenientia*, or the “fittingness,” of theological and ethical constructs in the present socio-cultural, political, and economic context of nagging disbelief in the down-to-earth performative efficacy of countercultural actions.

It is a waste of time to elaborate on solutions that only persons of consummated holiness could be able to understand and implement. Such things usually look good in the virtual world yet the problem at hand is most definitely not “virtual.” In light of the ambivalent observations regarding the perceptions of personally meaningful and practically transformative agency in pedagogical contexts, I envision the theological contours of sacramental agency using a somewhat baroque assortment of interlocutors: Christian sacramental discourse with an emphasis on the Eastern Orthodox sacramental imaginary; the still resilient postmodern musings of Michel Foucault on the specificity and partiality of transformative agency; Antoine Bousquet’s contemporary theory of chaoplexic non-linear warfare; the biblical notion of μακροθυμία (longanimity); an oblique glimpse of asceticism; and finally Édouard Glissant’s postcolonial optic of opacity. Here are the five suggestions.

#### *Sacramental agency as incremental*

First, sacramental agency is incremental or humble. The context for this marker of sacramental agency is mostly political. From an autobiographical perspective, having reached adulthood during the exciting years of the collapse of the Soviet empire and my country’s “singing revolution” in the late 1980s – early 1990s that shook off the communist colonization of Latvia, I know very well the ominous intricacies of revolutions. Indeed, revolutions can bring

unshackling and transformation on a scale and depth that seem mind-boggling and nearly sci-fi. In other words, revolutions, “singing”(the Baltic states), “velvet/gentle” (the Czech Republic and Slovakia), “rose” (Georgia), and their much bloodier cousins as the ones we have recently seen in the so-called Arab Spring can bring real, not just purely rhetorical, change. What comes after them is often different, even qualitatively different, from what was there before. Yet the aftermath can rarely be described as unquestionable progress without reserve, without dark undersides, without sinister continuities, and without blameless victims. Thus my trepidation about revolutions and their posteriority cannot but question the present *Zeitgeist* of the late postmodern Western societies. In these societies we do not detect a palpable proclivity toward organized mass movements of socio-political change, especially in the United States – for a number of very complex reasons that go beyond the scope of this essay. Suffice it to say that it *just might* be possible to talk about the “belatedly aroused citizenry”<sup>41</sup> in some of the recession-scarred societies of the “old” Europe. Yet the weakness of, for example, the Occupy movement in the United States does not indicate a robust communal and cooperative political will. It is highly likely that, as Zygmunt Bauman has argued, there is much more public ignorance than is openly admitted. That, in turn, leads to “the paralysis of will” and the “widespread disbelief in the efficacy of dissent and unwillingness to get politically involved.”<sup>42</sup>

And here I invoke the still relevant, I submit, observations of Michel Foucault about the significance of “historico-critical attitude” for the process of evaluation of “where change is

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<sup>41</sup> Pankaj Mishra, “Democracy and Capitalism Are Heading for a Breakup,” *Bloomberg*, June 10, 2012. Available at: [www.bloomberg.com](http://www.bloomberg.com). Accessed on July 24, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in a World of Consumers* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008): 192.

possible and desirable.”<sup>43</sup> In the famous essay uncannily titled “What is Enlightenment?”

Foucault proposed “the historical ontology of ourselves” which is above all, a critical ontology of ourselves that interrogates both our genealogy of successes, capacities, delusions, and failures.

In light of such self-analysis, Foucault advocates, perhaps counter-intuitively for today’s eyes, turning

...away all projects that claim to be global or radical. In fact we know from experience that the claim to escape from the system of contemporary reality so as to produce the overall programs of another society or another way of thinking, another culture, another vision of the world, has led only to the return of the most dangerous traditions.<sup>44</sup>

In this context, Foucault advises what I have described as incremental or humble action:

I prefer the very specific transformations that have proved to be possible in the last twenty years in a certain number of areas that concern our ways of being and thinking, relations to authority, relations between the sexes, the way in which we perceive insanity or illness; I prefer even these partial transformations that have been made in the correlation of historical analysis and the practical attitude, to the programs for a new man that the worst political systems have repeated throughout the twentieth century.<sup>45</sup>

What I (rather instinctually, through my post-Soviet Eastern European background) detect in Foucault’s lines is the 20<sup>th</sup> century Western cultural memory of totalitarianism that is associated precisely with the “global/radical” revolutionary changes of both Soviet Marxist

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<sup>43</sup> Michel Foucault “What is Enlightenment?” *The Foucault Reader* (Paul Rabinow, ed.; New York: Pantheon Books, 1984): 46.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 46-47.

Communism and Germanic National Socialism, to recall only the two most obvious examples. Considering the still living memory of horrendous suffering that these regimes unleashed, the appeal, prudence, and even the soft-handedness of the “partial/practical” emerges as an anamnetic vestige that functions as a safeguard against new totalitarian temptations.

To transpose Foucault’s sentiment for partial and specific transformations into a more theological key: sacramentally invested and empowered human agency consists in but is not limited to incremental transformative actions that are intentionally directed toward bringing about life-saving ecosocial change through specific and partial transformations. It cannot be forced or imposed or guaranteed – if so, the actions cease to be sacramental for violence is the most radical contradiction of sacramentality as a mode of relationality. The sacramental agency bodies forth through seemingly simple choices, for example, to use natural fertilizer for tomatoes in one’s little garden or in a large scale farm versus using chemical fertilizer that leaches high doses of nitrogen and salts into the earth. Actions like that can be done by anyone without necessarily being performed out of a consistent and established ideological framework. The transformative actions emerge from within the intersection of the sacramental revelation of God in creation, in interpersonal and intercultural experience, in sacred texts, in worship, and in the righteous and vicarious behavior of fellow human persons.

This sort of agency is humble in the sense that it springs into action locally and specifically. It materializes in one’s own back yard or city, through one’s own consumer choices without forcing others to follow suit through compulsion. Limiting or eliminating factory farmed meat from one’s diet, for instance, is not a spectacular act with immediately measurable dramatic



outcomes such as literally saving a person's life. Yet it has a deeply resonant and synergistic potential to converge with God's work of renewing the earth and the efforts of others of whose existence one may not even be aware. Remembering also the sacramental "stimulus" element, opportunities to share, inspire, network, and support others may arise with us being both of the giving and receiving end. Incremental and humble sacramental agency starts with(in) oneself and manifests through the simultaneous transformation of both attitude and knowledge as well as practices. Whatever one (an individual, a community, a nation-state, an alliance of states) is not capable or willing to do themselves cannot be projected upon others with any degree of legitimacy or integrity. Additionally, the awareness is growing that our attitudes, reactions, and behaviors are truly glocal not just in the mystical sense of spiritual non-locality of holiness and prayer but also through an increasing awareness of how, for instance, pollution travels across the globe to unleash its harm upon unsuspecting habitats and populations. Therefore sacramental agency is humble precisely to emphasize that one's actions and choices can contribute to making a difference for good or for ill beyond one's immediate life-world and lifetime. In this sense, starting incrementally and humbly may produce fruit rather majestically – or ruinously.

*Sacramental agency as profoundly voluntary*

Second, sacramental agency is profoundly voluntary. Sacramental relationality is the antidote of coercion, manipulation, violation, and conscription. As voluntary, sacramental agency can only obtain through deliberate and dialogic self-investment. "Voluntary" does not stand for a drily rationalistic decision-making process to calculate potential gains and losses alone or the

formalism of “checking a box” when no other tolerable choices are offered. Sacramental agency is the antidote to imperialism and totalitarianism in terms of its origin, goal, or means of arriving at the goal since sacramentality as the relational interface between God and creation is always already radically synergistic. Reciprocity, not conquest and coercion, is the qualitative watermark of synergy. Hence, sacramental agency manifests itself with a momentous, as it were, *ex opere operantis* slant. Such a slant emphasizes the personal comportment and agential power of all those of us who participate in sacramental interactions. Our dispositions, wisdom, intentions, maturity, and integrity play a role in the synergistic endeavor of sacramental transformation although they do not determine the ultimate outcome. Sacramental agency bypasses the anachronisms of dualistic exaggeration of both divine omnipotence and human autonomy. This factor is crucial precisely to avoid abdicating human responsibility of being God’s co-workers to rejuvenate the planet from the deterioration that unholy human actions have already brought about.

A few words must be said about the relation between the emphasis on the voluntary nature of sacramental agency and the role of community. The value of community is highly praised as a way to modulate the alienation and recklessness that has come with avaricious “rugged individualism.” Sometimes nostalgic examples of allegedly “golden days” of a seemingly uncomplicated and benevolent communitarian past are invoked. But these supposedly golden days are usually invoked without considering the collectively marginalized lives of the voiceless throughout those historical eras and cultural formations – women and other oppressed minorities. Sometimes, especially in the postmodern affluent West, examples of an alleged

simplicity of life and communitarian values of the “less developed” cultures and societies of the “Two-Thirds world” are invoked. These invocations are nothing less than dangerously distracting day-dreaming strategies of the metropolitan elites who have become overwhelmed by the incessant – and self-inflicted – rat race for survival, wealth, and security in our lifeworld of increasingly inequitable global capitalism.

What ought not to be forgotten is the enduring aspirational legacy of Western modernity when it comes to the understanding of human person who is mature enough (remember Immanuel Kant’s and Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s *Mündigkeit!*) to be trusted and respected to make choices for themselves. In light of the totalitarian carnage of the 20<sup>th</sup> century with its dictatorships of a class, race, and soil-and-blood ideologies, the sacramental imaginary must insist on a radical and irrevocable parity between human individuality with its often indisposed and wounded yet enduring powers of discernment and self-commitment, and, on the other hand, communal values and needs. The sacramental way is neither ruggedly individualistic nor oppressively communitarian. To honor the *imago Dei* in all human persons consists in the affirmation of each human person’s dignity and right to live by freedom and not compulsion, regardless if such a compulsion comes from a hard-core totalitarian ideology or the international pop culture. To sacrifice oneself for the sake of religious or political collectivity can be part of a personal or group exercise of human agency. But only if and when such an action is undertaken voluntarily and without coercion, it can become truly sacramental in terms of its goals and means.

The present excitement about communally oriented lifestyles in the so-called “First world” often seems superficial, at least for someone who still remembers the bygone era of the “Second world” and its Soviet style top-down regimes of strictly enforced yet specious communitarianism. The communal romanticism of certain intellectual elites seems dangerously naïve in the political era of wobbly “coalitions of the willing” wherein alliances and loyalties are rhetorically grand yet virtually always practically underwritten by profit margins and strategic interests. Therefore, to avoid extremes, it is theologically prudent to underscore that meaningful, dignified and responsible ethical action – sacramental action – is an irrevocably personal and voluntary action. It is, obviously, embodied and embedded in the socio-cultural realities, peculiarities and exigencies of every historical moment. This kind of action forms within and bodies forth across the interface of divine-human synergy through the cultural and material networks of human interaction toward God’s *shalom* – wholeness, harmony, and trustful conviviality of all creation.

On the other hand, the widespread understanding of the current environmental predicament as global and as consequently requiring a globally concerted action to avert ecosocial catastrophes creates a painfully sublime irony. In the present circumstances concerted action and perhaps even a somewhat forced unity may be justifiable for finding solutions to climate crisis. The recent déjà vu of the global “keeping up appearances” in Rio+20 exemplifies the “G-Zero” situation that the political scientist Ian Bremmer has so insightfully described based on the previous stalemate at the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit. In the G-Zero world no single country or political alliance has enough power and resources to impose beneficial (or

otherwise) solutions on the rest of the world; yet, on the other hand, there is “not nearly enough common ground among the leading established and emerging players to reach a deal that would have required sacrifice from all sides.”<sup>46</sup> Consequently, since the present G-Zero world is in (a hard to predict) transition according to Bremmer, we find ourselves in an “every nation to itself” era.<sup>47</sup> What we are seeing on a politico-economic level is akin to a corporate individualism within the asymmetrically interdependent networks of globalized capital, communications and commodities. Ironically, the more successful globalization becomes in terms of the depth of penetration of the free-flow of goods, information, technologies and even labor, the more its successes turn into arguments for opting out of the system to protect national labor markets and state sovereignty. Precisely at the moment when global problems have the best chance to be constructively addressed through globally concerted policies and attitudes, the local fears and desires for sheer economic survival and political stability accentuate the “everyone to themselves” orientation.

It is certainly consoling to think that no single power in the world is currently able to impose its will upon others short of provoking a multilaterally assured nuclear destruction. But it also means that such a grudgingly shared (dis)empowerment is inscribed with the negativity of unfulfilled ambitions and resentful vacuum of transformative leadership on the level of national and regional collectivities. In this context, the moral exigency for transformative action falls outside the collective structures of governments and established top-down political institutions.

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<sup>46</sup> Ian Bremmer, *Every Nation for Itself: Winners and Losers in a G-Zero World* (New York: Penguin, 2012): 9.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 151-184.

That is, it falls upon individual human persons and their emerging, unproven, liquid and unpredictable grass-root networks.

On a more intimate scale, the landscape is eerily similar in the spiritual realm. A comparison like this may seem a bit far-fetched. But it would surely be a mistake to ignore how personalized, decentered, and fluid our religious affiliations and spiritual allegiances are becoming. Customized “spiritual but not religious” approaches proliferate within and without institutionalized religious traditions. Individualism is a fact of life; we live in a “hyper-individualized, hyper-fragmented, hyper-hyped world of 21C culture.”<sup>48</sup> Deeply personalized search for spiritual wholeness has brought new attention to ancient practices such as spiritual direction among the millennials.<sup>49</sup> These spiritual trends run parallel to the socio-political and cultural trends that squarely posit individuality<sup>50</sup> dwelling within fluid networks as the *de facto* point of departure for political, cultural and economic aspirations. The same proclivity is reflected in the individualized search for the healing of mind and spirit as well as meaningful agency.

Sacramental agency is irretrievably tied to the tangible and palpable materiality of creation and history. In our present context of evolving environmental disaster, our intentions –

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<sup>48</sup> *Missio* Conference, Emergent and Fresh Expressions spirituality movement, the Episcopal Church in USA, Cincinnati, OH, September 29-October 1, 2011. More at [www.missioconference.org](http://www.missioconference.org)

<sup>49</sup> See, for example, Lisa Wangsness, “Growing Demand for Spiritual Directors,” *The Boston Globe*, May 6, 2012, at [http://articles.boston.com/2012-05-06/metro/31587511\\_1\\_spiritual-directors-international-spiritual-books-christianity](http://articles.boston.com/2012-05-06/metro/31587511_1_spiritual-directors-international-spiritual-books-christianity)

<sup>50</sup> See Graham Ward’s reflections on Charles Taylor’s work in the late postmodern epoch and its “increasing individual expressivism” with its “plethora of new, hyperindividualized spiritualities and self-transcendencies,” “Theology and Postmodernism: Is It All Over?” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 80:2 (2012):467.

alongside dreams, hopes, words and tweets – alone do not make sacraments. Chanting litanies, writing books and meditating are not enough. To use the old Augustinian adage, the *word* is added to the *element*, and this, then, becomes the *sacrament*. Only if and when the redemptive divine “word,” the *logos*, intention, reason, promise and the “element” – soil, fertilizer, product, technology, and ultimately any true human action of life-affirming cultivating, producing, sustaining and consuming – come together can transformative change be rendered sacramentally. Only sacramental transformation is intrinsically ethical: through sacramentality as the interface of communication and collaboration God works together synergistically with thoroughly voluntary individual human actions and intentions without coercion or conscription – or the agency won’t be sacramental any longer and the difference potentially being made will be a forced act of submission or compliance. As mere compliance and submission to God or to other human beings, an action can only be reactive but not proactive regardless of its immediate effect; hence neither truly free nor truly co-creative, nor genuinely sacramental.

### *Sacramental agency as longanimous*

Third, sacramental agency is longanimous. Here I first refer to the Scriptures. In the New Testament the notion of longanimity or patience – *makrothumia* (μακροθυμία) – is among Paul’s famous catalogue of the fruits of the Spirit (Gal 5:22). It appears in other NT writings, such as the Epistle of James, and 1 and 2 Peter, where *makrothumia* is attributed not only to human comportment but indeed divine disposition (1 Pet 3:20; 2 Pet 3:15).<sup>51</sup> *Makrothumia* denotes a

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<sup>51</sup> A related notion, ὑπομένω and ὑπομονή (v. to abide, to not recede or flee, to hold fast, to bear bravely; n. endurance, steadfastness, remaining under the load, staying power) also gestures toward a similar attitude (e.g., James 1: 12, 5:11; Rom 12:12).

long-tempered disposition, a long-mindedness, forbearance, sustained passion, slow anger, and longanimity (*longanimitas*).

Sacramental agency is longanimous – but not merely lenient. As longanimous, it is a sustained comportment and effort, often without the pleasures of instant gratification or the solace of seeing its own fruit to blossom. The acts of sacramental agency to make a difference through conserving, preserving, restoring, recycling, and refusing to personally participate in further devastation of the environment through judicious choices of food, housing, clothing, transportation, investment strategies and entertainment, often appear to be invisible, solitary and inconsequential to the very people who perform them. They seem to dissipate in the ocean of routine ignorance, irresponsibility, and thoughtless greed. What *is* severely visible, however, is the “front load” of costs. It is as if all that one can see and feel while paying a premium for ecologically produced food or sustainably made flooring is the “mere bread and wine” without the corresponding lived experience of the real presence of the “body and blood” to use an eucharistic analogy.

Despite these obvious caveats, sacramental agency today will hardly be sustainable without the longanimity of purpose, commitment, and desire that is capable and willing to accept the semi-clarity and open-endedness instead of readily measurable outcomes. I will return to this point later. For now, suffice it so say that sacramental agency operates in counterpoint to instant access, confirmation, feedback, results. Sacramental agency has a higher pain threshold when it comes to patiently waiting for the desired difference to appear, to materialize, to unfold.



Longanimity is a severely countercultural disposition; indeed today it ought to be unapologetically characterized as ascetic.

Talk about asceticism may be ominous yet it is virtually unavoidable when it comes to ecojustice today. Transformative action is costly. As longanimous, sacramental agency is, to borrow from Vladimir Lossky, an ascetic process: namely, not a “mortification which suppresses the passions of the body, but rather [...] the acquisition of a new and better energy.”<sup>52</sup> As such, it practices restraint and self-limitation yet not as an end in itself; not merely as an auto-teleological “technology of the self” to put it in Foucauldian terms. Within the teleology of sacramental transformation, longanimous agency, to use Elizabeth Theokritoff’s expression, “has more to do with *giving* than with *giving up*.”<sup>53</sup> Kallistos Ware emphasizes the positivity of transfiguration and refinement as the goal of ascetic agency instead of repression and elitism. Bona fide ascetic agency as a deeply personal and voluntary comportment is not, however, “simply a selfish quest for individual salvation but a service rendered to the total human family.”<sup>54</sup> Proleptically speaking, it is a universal vocation.

But here I must add that longanimous sacramental agency that operates in an ascetic mode is about giving *and* taking. Through its interactions with the natural world and various socio-political contexts, it attempts to model and embody the vintage sacramental “admirable

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<sup>52</sup> The true goal of ascetic life according to Vladimir Lossky is to acquire a “new and better energy” which then permits “the body as well as the spirit to participate in the life of grace,” *In the Image and Likeness of God* (John H. Erickson and Thomas E. Bird, eds.; Crestwood, New York: St. Vladimir’s Seminary Press, 2001):64.

<sup>53</sup> Theokritoff, *Living in God’s Creation*, 114.

<sup>54</sup> Kallistos Ware, “The Way of the Ascetics: Negative or Affirmative?” in *Asceticism* (Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, eds.; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998):12.

commerce:” a give-and-take that is non-coercive and life-giving for all parties involved. It entails not just “giving up,” and not just even simply “giving” since that would harbor enormous potential for abuse. Additionally, a one- way “giving” model suggests an arrogant self-sufficiency that is never anything but an escapist or even masochistic denial of the foundational relationality of the created world. What is at stake here is that the need and ability to receive and be enriched through relationships is intrinsic for the fulfillment of the deepest human needs and desires. Under the auspices of sacramental agency everything – giving, receiving, needs and fulfillment – is accomplished with *makrothumia*, with a deliberate and rigorous long-mindedness about the world beyond one’s immediate desires; beyond even one’s perceived needs that today are always already laced with implanted consumerist sensibilities of the reckless pure economic reason. In short, the ascetical longanimity is akin to what Richard Valantasis has described as the orientation of “asceticism:” specific material and historically situated “performances within a dominant social environment intended to inaugurate a new subjectivity, different social relations, and an alternative symbolic universe.”<sup>55</sup> The new “ascetic” subjectivities are countercultural at least to a degree. Their performances are not necessarily always tied to self-imposed physical deprivations. But they do involve a practical reorchestration of one’s relationship to the self, others, and one’s connection to the material universe.

If the ascetic component of longanimous sacramental agency is understood solely as an imposed “giving up” (by one’s superego, church dogma, ideology, culture, brute force, market forces, etc.), then it is not only hypocritical but also a practically useless admonition. In today’s

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<sup>55</sup> Richard Valantasis, "Constructions of Power in Asceticism," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 63 (1995): 797.

world of growing masses of subaltern populations who have so little to survive on and virtually nothing to give up that would not make their lives even more disenfranchised, the calls from the global elites for sacrifice to an equal extent as the “First World” societies sound snobby and sanctimonious. On the other hand, the affluent end of the spectrum is culturally and ideologically indisposed toward self-restraint (*enkrateia*) unless it somehow practically and spiritually benefits them in some previously unrecognized way. The recent controversies around the deeply unpopular policies of austerity (or Graham Ward’s “new asceticism”<sup>56</sup>) in the wake of the “great recession” in the United States but even more so in certain European countries attest to the complexity of the challenge. And these proposed and occasionally implemented austerity-*cum*-deficit-reduction measures really do not even touch pressing ecojustice questions but rather are designed to deal with economic survival issues of generally affluent individuals, their pension funds, their nation states, and their financial solvency! Curbing excessive consumer credit card usage and tightening investment regulations for the sake of relatively short time survival and wellbeing reasons (saving pension funds for retirees, for instance) entails a considerably different rationale as compared, for example, to a robust change in energy policy in favor of renewable energy sources would require. Here I detect a need to distinguish between grudging yet pragmatic top-down austerity and a genuine and discerning bottom-up asceticism, new or old since the origins, conditions, and motivations for defensive austerity and vicarious asceticism are different.

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<sup>56</sup> Ward, “Theology and Postmodernism: Is It All Over?” 469-470.

In contrast, longanimous sacramental agency with all its contemporary ascetical underpinnings is a patient balancing act of give-and-take striving and straining toward a genuinely sacramental, i.e., “admirable” commerce of needs, desires for human fulfillment and happiness as well as responsibility and sacrifice. Living and choosing ecojustice over profit or plain utility or unreflective habits of consumption is inescapably costly even for those who *can* choose among alternatives. It entails a lived and felt personal sacrifice for most people in the present “interregnum”<sup>57</sup> of economic and political regimes. Consequently, it also entails an undeniable risk for all those who, after voluntary discernment of their values and capabilities, find vocation and strength for the long haul of incrementally embodying the transformation they believe in. Sustainably grown and fairly traded food, cleaner energy and means of transportation, energy efficient housing and appliances among other things incur costs that have to be borne and absorbed now without any ironclad guarantees that such choices will bring about the desired eco-social result or will produce a personal sense of happiness.

The countercultural seriousness of the ascetic aspect of sacramental agency and its economic implications should not be underestimated. One of the leading Christian proponents of ecojustice, the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew contends that “there will be an effective, transformative change in our world only when we are prepared to make sacrifices that are radical, painful, and genuinely unselfish. If we sacrifice little or nothing, we shall achieve little

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<sup>57</sup> Zygmunt Bauman, *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World* (Cambridge and Malden: Polity, 2010): 119-122.

or nothing.”<sup>58</sup> I do not question the theo-ethical truthfulness of Patriarch Bartholomew’s assessment. I do nevertheless wonder about how many of those who are gridlocked in the agonizing consumerist world order and its ruthless economic exigencies are ready to see sacrifice in terms of gain and fulfillment rather than loss and diminution that mark sacrifice as “voluntary self-emptying [that] brings self-fulfillment.”<sup>59</sup> At this point, there are no indications that the *kairos* of collective willingness or readiness for green politics, and all the actual sacrifices that it entails, is at hand despite the growing general anxiety about environmental deterioration.

What we are left with is the rightful emphasis on asceticism and its sacrificial element of sacramental agency that is perceived and practiced most longanimously as personal gift-giving and “voluntary offering that symbolizes sharing.”<sup>60</sup> In resonance with the second characteristic of transformative sacramental agency, I reiterate Bartholomew’s emphasis on ascetic sacrifice as an “offering in freedom. Only what we offer in freedom and in love can be considered a true sacrifice.”<sup>61</sup> Herein resides the crucial difference between austerity and ascetically colored sacrifice. Only the latter is longanimously vectored toward transformation rooted in freedom and generosity. It originates in personal encounter of freedom, love and joy with divine grace while the former stems from anxiety, short-term utility, and the maintenance of economic status quo.

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<sup>58</sup> Patriarch Bartholomew, *Encountering the Mystery: Understanding Orthodox Christianity Today* (New York: Doubleday, 2008): 67. Notably, his comments on sacrifice are included in the section titled “The Way of Asceticism.”

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

Finally, there is another caveat in relation to the longanimous sacramental agency. Namely, ascetic endeavors can degenerate into what Dietrich Bonhoeffer called “a merciless living reproach to other people” that arrogantly “usurps the bitter and ultimate seriousness of Christ’s work on salvation.”<sup>62</sup> The result is self-righteous distortion, ostentatiousness, and lack of humility. Or maybe, in less dramatic terms, there is a serious risk of “being a jerk” as a recent socio-psychological study of organic food consumers indicates. It turned out that the fans of organic food were more judgmental and less inclined to volunteer than both the control group and conventional comfort food group.<sup>63</sup>

#### *Sacramental agency as chaoplexic*

Fourth, sacramental agency is chaoplexic. Now, typically when one ponders all things sacramental, military science is among the last fields of human inquiry that come to mind. However, I find some the current explorations in conjunction with chaos theory and complexity science useful for thinking about the possible manifestations of sacramental agency. The notion of “chaoplexity” combines the insights from the theories of chaos and complexity. Chaoplexity, according to military scientist Antoine Bousquet, privileges “non-linearity, self-organization, and emergence, and the central metaphor is that of the network.”<sup>64</sup> Chaoplexic models call into

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<sup>62</sup> Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *Discipleship*, Dietrich Bonhoeffer Works, vol. 4 (Martin Kuske, Ilse Toedt, German eds.; Geoffrey B. Kelly and John D. Godsey, eds.; Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996): 160.

<sup>63</sup> Rheana Murray, “Organic Food Might Make You a Jerk,” *New York Daily News*, May 21, 2012. The study was done at Loyola University, New Orleans, and published in *Journal of Social Psychological and Personality Sciences* in May 2012.

<sup>64</sup> Antoine Bousquet, *The Scientific Way of Warfare: Order and Chaos on the Battlefields of Modernity* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009): 34.

question any tidy linearity, top-down control, stability, and precise predictability of human actions since such actions are always interactive, or networked, and display a broad range of nebulous behaviors and affiliations at the edge of chaos.<sup>65</sup> Instead of strictly controlled, vertical and supervised structures of social life with a heavy emphasis on stable and predictable outcomes, chaoplexic perception of agency – and not just in postmodern and postcolonial warfare with its ominous efficiency of insurgency and decentralized military networks – consists in recognizing non-linear relationships and evanescent, fluid, resilient, and adaptive behavior in a profoundly interdependent collective framework. These aspects of chaoplexity appear to be crucial as I think about sacramental agency apart from an exaggerated fideism. The chaoplexic vision of human actions and human sociality prioritizes the unpredictability of outcomes, the need for a radically horizontal or bottom-up structure of participation. Such a structure emphasizes the cooperative and collective nature of performative efficacy. Sometimes this approach is also called “swarming”/the swarm model.<sup>66</sup>

In terms of chaoplexity and “swarming,” sacramental agency is an agency “from below” – coordinated indirectly, or “without a center.”<sup>67</sup> It manifests through voluntary de-centered participation without predictable outcomes yet with shared goals. In this case, the goals are to facilitate transformative action towards curbing and reversing the fearsome degradation of our planet’s ecosystems. The chaoplexic dimension of sacramental agency allows for a non-

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<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 176-179.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 210-211. Also, see Zygmunt Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance in the World of Consumers* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2008): 9-17.

<sup>67</sup> Bauman, *Does Ethics Have a Chance*, 11.

deterministic interplay of interdependent yet incremental and always deeply personal/voluntary human actions to advance healing transformation of our planetary life world. On the one hand, it also allows for independent variables and preserves us from totalitarian surveillance and enforcement. But most importantly, chaoplexic models of relationality and interaction engender hope that the very unpredictability of the intricate human and non-human interface – meaning the natural world as well as the works and energies of the triune God – is a uniquely fitting theology that is radically open to the engodding synergy of divinity and the whole creation through the sacramental agency of humanity.

Doubtlessly, unpredictability highlights uncertainty, often an existentially terrifying uncertainty and dread. Since human history has never been a theater of happiness, the possibility of surprise is not always a preordained blessing nor should it be glorified as automatically positive. Yet, the imaginary of chaoplexic unpredictability affirms the transformative potential of synergistic agencies even from a position of actual or perceived subalternity, disempowerment and even despair. Low-tech, seemingly sporadic and incremental actions of both individuals and groups that may not instantly and comprehensively assert their impact can coalesce and play off one another in unpredictably fruitful (as well as harmful) ways.

From a chaoplexic perspective, human agency can synergistically coalesce with divine agency in a sacramental counterpoint of intentionality and performance, call and response, gift and effort, sacrifice and joy. Chaoplexy is a vision of openness without bureaucratic inertia or panoptic control, human or divine. But such an openness is without guarantees. It is without assured outcomes – be they the notorious mutually/multiply assured destruction or the



sacramental transfiguration of the degraded Earth through the synergy between the divine Sustainer and Nourisher of all life and our longanimous acts of just love.

Chaoplexic relationality also might, just might, rekindle a strangely heartening specter of the *ex opere operato* principle. It does so by allowing that a genuine transformation can occur despite ambiguous desires, partial efforts, inconsistent performances, and imperfect knowledge. In this framework, chaoplexy as a peculiarly salient mutation of *ex opere operato* obtains within the unpredictable contours of sacramental synergy. However, it does so without the institutionalized theological formalism and its defensive rigidity that has historically characterized the application of this theological idea. Chaoplexy has nothing to do with the “validity” of any particular rituals as defined by various denominational orthodoxies. Instead, chaoplexy as a contemporary envisagement of the *ex opere operato* principle within a tenaciously sacramental (reciprocal, synergistic, voluntary, non-hegemonic!) interface articulates a hope of salvific transformation. But there is nothing automatic or bureaucratic about hope even if the bureaucracy in question is ecclesiastical. Ultimately, hope dilutes doctrinaire guarantees about presence, procedure, and efficiency; hope is an idiosyncratically eschatological animal. And today, to talk about eschatology really means to talk about opacity.

*Sacramental agency is opaque*

Fifth, sacramental agency at this point in human history is decidedly opaque. In other words, the performative efficacy of our sacramental agency stands under an empirical question mark rather than a palpable exclamation mark of realized eschatology. At this point in the

process of ecological degradation, the fruits of our sacramental work to preserve and restore our wounded ecosystems may be visible only sporadically, precariously, and inconclusively – in other words, opaquely. In some cases, not at all – at least during our lifetimes.

Until the ultimate reckoning under the auspices of beatific vision, our incremental, voluntary, longanimous, and chaoplexic efforts as part and parcel of the sacramental synergy of the cosmic *opus Dei*, are emphatically subject to an eschatological proviso. To reiterate an earlier point already mentioned in passing: in light of Christian history and its frequent tendencies to devalue this world and its suffering in order to exalt (misguidedly and often profitably) the next, the invocation of eschatology in any theological argument today must guard vigilantly against camouflaged maneuvers to condone injustice, oppression, and hypocrisy. Any responsible and truly redemptive eschatology must be what Ellen Charry compellingly calls “a realizing eschatology.”<sup>68</sup> The *modus operandi* of realizing eschatology is salvation centered in therapeutic sanctification, an altogether affirmative stance toward the whole creation through the incremental healing of the broken *imago Dei* and growing into the wisdom of divine love while enjoying oneself in the process. All of that, unfortunately, must happen over against the centuries-long Christian backdrop of the “heavy emphasis on future eschatology at the expense of a temporal, realizing eschatology” that has caused “an underemphasis on temporal happiness” and has resulted in the absence of “a substantial doctrine of human flourishing.”<sup>69</sup>

In the meantime, the opacity of sacramental agency entails not only the often hidden redemptive labor of the Creator Father/Mother, in the Incarnate Word and Wisdom, and through

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<sup>68</sup> Ellen T. Charry, *God and the Art of Happiness* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2010).

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*, 152, 157.

the Life-Giving Spirit in synergy with our potentially fecund efforts. It is not possible to measure and assess how redemptive and effective this triune *opus Dei* is against any human benchmarks of progress and transparency. But it is equally impossible to assess how fecund are and will be our synergistic toils; the outcomes are and will remain opaque in the foreseeable future. Here the divine hiddenness resonates with our own, synergistically coalescing into a chaoplexic hiddenness. As a result, it is impossible to forecast the transformative efficacy of sacramental agency with accuracy and transparency.

There is, however, the following sense of clarity: our current environmental predicament may escalate to the point where the overload of pollution, waste, deforestation, and biodiversity loss can incurably obviate all human efforts to forestall the process of tipping toward catastrophe. The present attitudes of economic and cultural selfishness in combination with a growing spectrum of uncertainties that in different ways haunt both the elites and the subaltern individuals and communities do not inspire confidence that there is enough righteous indignation and even anxiety about the destiny of future generations to engender a globally concerted action to take practical and effective measures to stop – let alone work toward reversal – the climate change. As a living organism, our planet may reach the critical stage of distress where natural healing is no longer viable. This is a prospect that needs to be taken seriously not only in scientific terms but also in theological terms without recourse to escapist eschatologies or theological conspiracy theories, i.e., demonology and premillennial dispensationalism. In a nutshell, the failure to stop and reverse the progressive degradation of the Earth is as high as the possibility of success of the sacramental transformation. This is a situation of an unprecedented existential and

epistemological opacity that weighs on us in deeply material ways that cannot be simply theorized or believed away.

It is here that Édouard Glissant's postcolonial meditations on opacity and ambiguity are helpful: "Ambiguity is not always a sign of some shortcoming."<sup>70</sup> Relentless pursuit of clarity, univocity and transparency, according to Glissant (and many other postcolonial thinkers), is a peculiarly Western strategy of tackling challenges since "Western thought has led us to believe that a work must always put itself constantly *at our disposal*..."<sup>71</sup> To chase after transparency at the expense of life's rightful opacities is to create alienation, reduction and thus an imposition of oppressive totality.<sup>72</sup> Opacity, however, is the fecund matrix of genuinely relational/relative freedoms in thoughts, words, and deeds; it is neither coercive appropriation of the incomprehensible otherness nor arrogant "autism."<sup>73</sup> It is positively – and hopefully, I submit – distracting:

The thought of opacity distracts me from absolute truths whose guardian I might believe myself to be. Far from cornering me within futility and inactivity, by making me sensitive to the limits of every method, it relativizes every possibility of every action within me (...) the thought of opacity saves me from unequivocal courses (*des voies univoques*) and irreversible choices.<sup>74</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> Édouard Glissant, *Caribbean Discourse: Selected Essays* (J. Michael Dash, trans.; Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989):93.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 107. Italics in the original.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 155. Also see Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (Betsy Wing, trans.; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997): 190-191.

<sup>73</sup> Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 190, 192.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.

On this side of the eschatological fulfillment, opacity entails an aptitude or a virtue to recognize and live with more than just immediately visible, classifiable, and assessable outcomes. Sacramentality as relational interface and as epistemological and ontological imaginary can only live and move in the vast opacity of the inscrutable divine love that remains hidden even amidst revelation only to entice further encounters and deeper synergistic indwelling in the roomy wisdom of love with body and mind, and without the compulsion to reduce and conquer. The opaque is not simply the obscure as Glissant would hasten to remind us.<sup>75</sup> Opacity carries its own ingredient of chaoplexy: it entails a capacity to change course. Some might want to call this sort of opacity in a more time-honored theological fashion – faith.<sup>76</sup>

Opacity deepens and thickens all previous markers of sacramental agency as it traverses and augments them all – the humility of incremental change, the lonesomeness of voluntary action, the ascetic courage of longanimity; and it certainly expands the borderscapes of chaoplexic unpredictability even further. Ultimately, it points to the redemptive opacity – at least from our vantage point – of the divine wisdom.

Firstly, the earthly opacity of our physical and cultural universe inscribes human sacramental agency within the broader economy of divine relationality with the world. Sacramental agency becomes immersed in nothing less than the opacity of divine longanimity (μακροθυμία!) as 2 Pet. 3:8-9 attests. Similarly, earthly opacity attunes sacramental agency to the

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<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

<sup>76</sup> The connection with yet another theological virtue – hope – is visible in Heb 11:1 description of faith as “the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen.” Also, Rom 8: 24 ff: “For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope. For who hopes for what is seen? But if we hope for what we do not see, we wait for it with patience” (NRSV). Paul uses ὑπομονή in this text (see footnote 51).

opacity of divine wisdom – “secret and hidden,” that “no eye has seen, or ear heard, nor the human heart conceived” (1 Cor. 2: 7, 9). Divine wisdom, in contrast to the “wisdom of this age,” is not subject to expectations of reductive predictability. Furthermore, earthly opacity entrains sacramental agency towards the opacity of divine power that often seems painfully incremental and negligible by humanly measurable standards. It is precisely the opacity of divine power that unfolds in the “foolishness” that is “wiser than human wisdom” and through “weakness” that is “stronger than human strength” (1 Cor. 1:25).

Secondly and finally, opacity loops sacramental agency back to the challenging materiality of lived experience. Here Rahner’s “pessimistic realism” most fittingly describes the mood of the fivefold sacramental agency. As incremental, voluntary, longanimous, chaoplexic and opaque, it resists the temptation of being an “‘opiate’ in our existence or an analgesic for our lives.”<sup>77</sup> Therefore, the sacramental effort is equally rooted in the free and hopeful unpredictability of salvific hope but also in the unknowing if the difference one is striving to make, even sacrificially and even provisionally fruitfully, will be enough to change the frightening momentum of ecological decline and injustice.

Sacramental agency teases out transformative difference with every recycled beer can as it does with every prayer and hymn of praise, or with every inconvenient and costly advocacy endeavor for ecojustice. But it does that and many other things with an acceptance of the “hardness of real life.”<sup>78</sup> A full recognition that reality we face is hard thwarts, I submit, a triumphantly affirmative answer about the efficacy and meaning of one’s efforts to transform the

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<sup>77</sup> Rahner, *Foundations of Faith*, 404.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

inertia of environmental destruction. Instead it acknowledges the possibility of death and failure as they circumscribe the affirmative answer into the key of a radically open-ended “perhaps.” Yet the persuasive power of opaque sacramental agency and its pessimistically realistic – indeed, bittersweet, “perhaps” – is that this sort of agency is roomy enough to resist making idols of both self-indulgent oblivion and paralyzing doomsday scenarios. It remains stubbornly open to liberating hope even as it clearly recognizes biotic and abiotic suffering that seeks understanding, healing, and transformation. In five ways – incrementally, voluntarily, longanimously, chaoplexically and opaquely – it bodies forth vital difference through sacramental acts of mercy toward the suffering planet and fellow human persons while knowing that all of us, as far as our planetary home is concerned, might still have to come face to face with the “chalice of the death of this existence *with* Jesus Christ.”<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.* Italics added by me.