

# #776 The Preacher's Audience: Participation in the Mystery

We were glad to receive the following thoughtful response to [Thursday Theology #775](#). It comes to us from Bill Burrows, professor of missiology at the New York Theological Seminary, former president of the American Society of Missiology, and keynote speaker at the Third International Crossings Conference in 2010. As he explained to me in a short prefatory note, Bill writes this response in order to “amplify some things Robert Shultz said” in the original ThTh posting, and to add “a Catholic sacramental perspective on one of the essential aspects of joining in Eucharistic worship.”

To the rest of our readers, a reminder that we welcome your participation in this ongoing discussion. Send your thoughts to [cabraun98ATaolDOTcom](mailto:cabraun98ATaolDOTcom).

Peace and Joy,  
Carol Braun, for the editorial team

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Millions of gallons of ink have been spread on billions of acres of paper as Catholics and Lutherans have argued over whose theology of the Eucharist is right. I tend to think that it's a question of differing wisdoms pointing to different aspects of truth deeper than words can describe. In that spirit, I offer a thought on the relationship of the sermon or homily to a community's participation in worship.

In both our traditions, the liturgy of the Word and of the sacrament are integral to the entire act of worship. At the time of the Second Vatican Council, when I first began to think through what it means to *participate* in worship, I read

something (probably in the work of the eminent German Benedictine liturgist [1886 – 1948] Odo Casel) that has stuck with me. Casel, perhaps more than any scholar of ancient liturgy, unearthed the relationship between the Christian Eucharistic celebration of the Mystery of our salvation in Christ and the way in which Greek and Roman mystery cults were celebrated. He is both feted and roasted for what he made of this research, but few have been able to refute the fundamental insight. The genius of early Christian worship was its wedding of elements of Jewish sacred meals as memorials that represented archetypal salvation-historical events (the Exodus, as the prime example) with the sacrifice of Christ on Calvary and the deep cultural roots of celebrating (pagan) mysteries that were believed to re-enact one kind or another of primordial transformation or entrée to a state of gnosis.

Okay, we all know what happened with gnosticism and the battles to differentiate its fantastical worldview from the rugged historical realism of both the faith and rituals of Judaism and the fundamental faith of Christianity. In both Jewish and Christian faith, we celebrate God's total involvement in the real, earth-shaking and renewing events of Exodus, bestowal of Torah, Calvary, the Resurrection, and Pentecost. If I may cut to the chase, in the liturgy of the Word, the Christian is brought to consider the life, death, teaching, resurrection, and presence of the Lord in oneself and the community; taught to apply this to oneself; brought to confess one's unworthiness; and to entrust oneself to the mercy of God. All this in the company of one's family and one's faith community gathered together to do what? Worship? Of course. But what is the supreme worship of the Christian? To join Christ in offering oneself to God, joining the paschal *transitus* of the Lord with feelings of gratitude (*eucharistein*) for having been created, forgiven, and re-created. And doing this in the context of the liturgical

action of blessing bread that by the power of the Spirit becomes the body of the Lord, blessing wine that becomes his blood by the same Spirit. Eating it and drinking it as a symbol of one's total trust in the promise of the gospel that the Lord is food and drink for our paschal *transitus*.

In my life I have known several celebrants who have understood the unity of the liturgy of the Word and of the Eucharist. Each has given homilies that have in one way or another mined the scriptures for the elements that the Crossings Community has brought into relief. Their homilies have invited the congregation to commune with the Lord in his total act of trust to the Father, our sacramental act being both a memorial of his death and resurrection and a preparation for the ultimate act of trust, dying physically with the Lord.

Sermons easily degenerate into moralizing. A good homily, on the other hand, is an act in which the homilist/celebrant helps the congregation to remember who we are in relation to Christ and to participate with the Lord in the great Mystery of salvation. Which is the reason every leader of worship, who is given the role of being the Spirit's agent in bringing the congregation to mindfulness, needs to pray before preparing the homily and leading worship.

Bill Burrows

wrburrowsAToptonlineDOTnet

Cortlandt Manor, NY