God’s Immanence:

Liturgical Implications?

A Question

The 2016 Call for Papers in Systematic Theology asked, "In what way does the efficacy of the sacraments promote belief in the doctrine of God?" Inquiring in the reverse direction, "how does belief in the doctrine of God promote the efficacy of the sacraments?" will be the aim here. Belief is the act, doctrine on God the content; sacraments and liturgy will be interchangeable. Is the latter question methodologically legitimate? There is, after all, “the ancient saying: lex orandi, lex credendi …The law of prayer is the law of faith: the Church believes as she prays.”¹ Should not the priority of liturgy to doctrine organize reflection? And yet the Church not only believes as she prays but also prays as she believes. So “When the Church celebrates the sacraments, she confesses the faith received from the apostles.”² Sacraments confess and so contain “the faith received from the apostles.” Does not a mutual rather than unilateral dynamic underlie the ancient saying?³

The priority of Christ, Scripture, and apostolic tradition made beliefs normative in the origin, however inchoate, of exterior, effective, sacramental signs and meanings through which Christ and the Spirit acted within people. Seven ecumenical councils from 325 C.E. to 787 C.E formulated key Christological and Trinitarian beliefs in dogmatic propositions. Believed doctrines condition interior sacramental efficacy. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy reminds us that, “…in order that the liturgy may be able to produce its full effects, it is necessary that the faithful come to it with proper dispositions.”⁴ Performance of the rite and its inward grace involve believing dispositions in ministers and recipients. Dispositions or intentions void
of, or severely deficient in, belief in Christian doctrine on God, for example, are not “proper” because Christ’s liturgical action is received with Christian belief.

The Niceno-Constantinopolitan Creed registers beliefs that set a horizon within which intentions and dispositions take their rise. The First and Second Articles confess belief in the act of creating by the Father through the Son. Belief in God as Creator inconspicuously envelops as well as colors sacramental intentions. Belief in the Creator implicitly affirms divine transcendence. Now, what happens to believing intentions if doctrine on God recovers divine immanence? Briefly, arrival at divine immanence modifies biblical and traditional imagery of the transcendent Creator and thereby renews understanding of creatureliness in liturgy. Immanence leads liturgical participants into new appreciation for the nearness of God to all of creation.

Equilibrating transcendence and immanence has special salience in the contemporary West. Immanence off-sets the externality of God Whom classical Western theism locates “in a supernatural realm above and apart from the human world.” Transcendence may be misunderstood as distance or absence. I suspect that, despite reception of Vatican II’s Trinitarian ressourcement, liturgical renewal, and soteriology of the universal saving will of God, the externality of God to creation narrows the intentions of many Western Catholics. Recovering God-in-creatures (immanence) liberates customary concentration on God-above-creatures (transcendence) to accept also the nearness of God to all creation. God-in-creatures has everything to do with *creatio ex nihilo*.

**Creation from Nothing**

Gerhard May has argued that Christians neither received a doctrine of *creatio ex nihilo* ready-made from the Hebrew Scriptures, nor thought of it until the sub-apostolic period, though Philo may have come to it first. Whether its Christian origin lies with the *Shepherd of Hermas* in mid-
second century C.E., with Theophilus of Antioch, Irenaeus of Lyons, or Tertullian toward the end, it meant God created with no pre-existing finite reality. Adjoining *ex nihilo* to *creatio* barred any contribution from what is not God—whether the Receptacle and Demiurge in Plato’s *Timaeus*, Aristotle’s co-existent world, Stoicism’s fire, or Gnosticism’s intermediary agents. Consequently, matter too was created by God and so was good. *Ex nihilo* countered Neo-Platonic contrast between ungenerated, recalcitrant matter and a higher, immaterial realm of God as well as Christian Gnostic speculation on a descending series of intermediaries in creating. Ex nihilo affirmed God’s power over, superiority to, and transcendence above everything other than God. For May this was not a biblical doctrine but a precise new concept formulated against specific second century C.E. adversaries.

However, an operational belief is one thing, its exact conceptual formulation another. Looking to the former by taking more extensive account of less formal, developing belief Paul Copan and William Lane Craig criticize May’s analysis and make the case for *creatio ex nihilo* as biblical doctrine. They note Psalm 121, Job 38, Proverbs 68: 22–30, and 2 Maccabees 7:28 in the Hebrew Scriptures. In the New Testament Copan and Craig point to passages on creation (e.g. Romans 4: 17, 11: 36; Colossians 1: 16; 1 Corinthians 8:6; 2 Corinthians 5:17; Ephesians 2:15; Colossians 1:15–20; Hebrews 1:1–4, 11: 3; John 1: 3; Revelation 3:14) that imply *ex nihilo*. May is correct on precise and formulated doctrine. But Copan and Craig have much to recommend them on biblical affirmations—operative, implied, fragmentary—of God creating from nothing.

Further, in the New Testament the Jewish creation faith of Jesus and his followers in speaking of the kingdom of God assumed that, as Elizabeth Johnson points out, “the natural world would be included in this good news.” The New Testament sustained Israel’s creation-faith, attributing creational agency to Jesus. The Second Article of the Creed followed suit in
professing, “through him all things were made.” “All things” expressed *ex nihilo*, a theme Augustine taught in *The Confessions*.12

By the Middle Ages Avicenna (980–1037 C.E.), Maimonides (1135–1204 C.E.), and Aquinas (1225–1274 C.E.) all defended *creatio ex nihilo*.13 Since then, “The notion of *creatio ex nihilo* has become a doctrine firmly established in the three Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism and Islam).”14 In all three traditions, creating is primary causality that differs from, exceeds, and is barely analogous to countless efficient causalities investigated by the many fields in the sciences. As William R. Stoeger observed, the claim, *creatio ex nihilo*, is philosophical/theological not natural-scientific.15

Stoeger argues for complementarity rather than rivalry. For instance, physics and cosmology have testable validity all the way to the Planck era— starting at $10^{-43}$ of a second with a temperature of $10^{32}$ K above absolute zero—. However, concludes Stoeger, the projected prior condition of zero volume, infinite heat, and infinite density signals that the standard model fails to explain the origin of the existence and potential order of the universe. Science cannot answer Heidegger’s question, why is there something rather than nothing? That is what *creatio ex nihilo* answers. Today *ex nihilo* excludes Isaac Newton’s absolute space that some after Einstein seem to imagine as a receptive nothingness before the Big Bang.16

Creating does not occur in time but causes time.17 In Soskice’s paraphrase Maimonides held that “Time, too, is God’s creature.”18 Stoeger points out that there was no ‘before’ because there was neither time nor nothingness before creation but ‘only’ divine plenitude. Creating includes not only the moment of origin, identical to the Big Bang or not, but also God’s constant causality of effects in their temporal existences as variable as creatures are differentiated. Their evolution comes from continual secondary causality in interplay between regularity and random events.19
Aquinas

The following consultation with Aquinas corroborates Gregersen and Johnson on immanence then considers something Anne Clifford mentions in passing, God’s “ongoing causal immanence in creatures.” Aquinas upheld divine presence in, as opposed to absence from, the existing whole of the universe. God’s general omnipresence in creation is distinct from the special omnipresence of grace in the redeemed. General omnipresence is the universal effect of divine creating.

In the Summa contra Gentiles III, c. 68, n. 11 Aquinas clarifies that God exists in all things, “per modum causae agentis . . .,” that is, “in the fashion of an agent cause . . .” Harm Goris sums up: “God must be present everywhere because He is the immediate cause of the being of things.” As well, divine causality in creatio ex nihilo has to be simultaneous with its effects and therefore a continuous creating since effects are continuous in cosmic and human history. Whenever created effects exist and act God is the primary, present cause. “All things exist only as created by God ex nihilo at every moment.”

For Aquinas both transcendence and immanence stem from creatio ex nihilo. They are two aspects of God in relation to creatures. Rocca remarks that, “God’s nature becomes transcendent and immanent, if you will, once creatures are in existence...” Rocca and Te Velde underscore that there is no transcendence, no immanence except in creaturehood dependent on God. The two attributes are not, that is, eternal aspects of the Trinity. Inner-Trinitarian relations of origin do not involve transcendence because one and the same divine nature is that of each distinct person. Rather, divine transcendence and immanence occur only in the relation of creation to God as Creator.
In the *Summa Theologiae, Ia, Q. 8, a. 1* Aquinas tied divine immanence to creatures’ existing.²⁷ He stated, “...a thing’s existence is more interior and deep than anything else...and hence it is necessary for God to exist in all things, and intimately so.”²⁸ The reason why is that any reality whose existing is not its defining essence derives from and depends for existence on the Creator. In that *sui generis* dependence there is unimaginable closeness between creature as effect and Creator as cause.

Rocca underlines that in Q. 8, a.1 Aquinas bases immanence on transcendence. God is immanent in creatures in conceptual and logical consequence from creaturely existing. Divine immanence is God present to and in something that exists. Unless there is a created existent there can be no immanence. Rocca explains that for Aquinas creating by the transcendent Creator grounds immanence, not the other way around. The logic is impeccable. Only in what exists can God be immanent.

**Immanent Creating**

Yet I am not convinced that the conceptual, logical priority of transcendence is also ontological. I don’t think Aquinas held that God first created then in a second act became immanent in creatures. Only one act is at issue, creating, not two acts, a transcendent creating then a consequent, immanent presence. Nothing in Aquinas contradicts that immanence is co-primary and co-extensive with transcendence. Creating is one act in whose effect dependence has two aspects, transcendence and immanence. Creating brings about a transcending kind of immanence, not a transcendent act with an immanent effect or consequence. Rocca’s interpretation of Aquinas, I suggest, does not engage a possibility in Q. 8, a. 1, *ad primum* and *ad tertium.*
The *ad primum* provides footing for immanent creating. Aquinas reasons that, “[t]he perfection of his [sic] nature places God above everything [transcendence] …yet as causing their existence he also exists in everything [immanence].”29 That is a remarkable declaration. God exists in everything because God causes everything other than God. Precisely as cause of their existence God is in all creatures. I understand this to mean that immanence is not consequential from but co-primary with transcendence. By primary causality God is immanent in creation no less than transcendent beyond it. One achievement in conceiving the distinction of primary from secondary causality was to preserve the integral, independent reality of creatures in their being and activity. Agreeing, it nonetheless seems an inescapable conclusion from Aquinas that primary causality as cause of creaturely existing equally, and contrary to Deism, is immanent in all secondary causality.

Hence the *ad tertium* adds that, “The omnipotence of God…is displayed by his acting in everything without intermediary, for nothing is distant from him in the sense of God not being in it.”30 *Creatio ex nihilo* initiates divine immanence in and transcendence above creation. What has been underdeveloped is that the presence of divine causality to its effects is immanent too. Indeed, in Western Christianity with notable exceptions attention to transcendence has overwhelmed immanence. Think of Gothic cathedrals, classic Western theism, much piety and some preaching in reaction against secularization.

That is, despite the logical sequence explained by Rocca in reference to other statements of Aquinas, primary causality is immanent in existing creatures. Primary causality is *creatio ex nihilo*. So continuous *creatio ex nihilo* is immanent in whatever exists other than God. The Creator is always and everywhere transcendent, but never absent because always immanent. Not that creation is or contains the Creator. Admittedly, pantheism and some panentheism
compromise creature/Creator incommensurability. Nevertheless, and despite possible misunderstanding, Aquinas hazarded saying that creation is ‘in God’, partaking in God’s existing since, “God also contains things by existing in them.”

David B. Burrell states a crucial difference introduced by Aquinas. Since, “...the being that Aristotle took to characterize substance must become (for Aquinas) an esse ad creatorem (an existing in relation to the creator),” God’s sui generis primary causality constitutes being-created as being-from God. Being-from God is every creature’s relation to God. I think that can be said in terms of a being-onto the Creator. In light of immanence it seems to me that being-from and being-onto the Creator also is being-with God. Divine causal immanence has the effect that creaturely—not only human—existing is beings-with-God.

Everything created is always with-God. Wherever there are created realities, there is God, always at work as it were, sustaining created existents. “My Father until now works, and I work” (John 5: 15). God’s immanent work as primary cause is nearer to our own human existing than we are to ourselves. The universe as a whole and in all parts is as close to the Creator as it is to its own existence. Arriving at that universal yet differentiated immanence deepens the intentions of liturgical participants.

Liturgical Implications?

Under the aspect of divine transcendence the universe as a whole and all creatures, not least humanity, are effects intimating the causal Creator. A possible misunderstanding attends reasoning from created effect to divine cause. The divine cause may be imagined as distant or absent. The aspect of divine immanence ‘locates’ God in all creation, including humanity. Attention to immanence leads liturgical participants to the nearness of the Creator in the cosmos and themselves. New appreciation of God-in-creation can evoke deeper love for God and
creatures, a disposition favorable to sacramental fruitfulness. How does immanence make a difference?

For a start, it augments Irwin’s liturgical theology on the cosmic context of liturgy.\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Creatio ex nihilo} affirms that matter is created good by God, something essential to sacramentality. Further, immanence clarifies why, “matter is never divorced or separated from the God who made all things.”\textsuperscript{35} So focus on immanence better enables us to “see the things we ‘use’ in liturgy as truly revelatory of God, not as utensils…that have no meaning except when they are used in the liturgy.”\textsuperscript{36} If taken as a paradigm that seeing breaks through the history of modern anthropocentrism that has produced the ecocrisis.

More in particular, whether in the RCIA process or not, the intentions of those instructing and those to be baptized benefit from arrival at immanence. Human existence as fallen can be known as being-with-God blocked by refusal to be exactly that. Baptism into Christ releases the person’s created humanity to rejoice in the presence of the immanent Creator of the evolutionary cosmos, physical nature, and humanity.\textsuperscript{37}

John 1: 1–2 and Hebrews 1 reveal the act of creating through the Logos/Son who called Israel’s God his Father. In light of immanence in Baptism we recover the primordial existing from and with the immanent Logos Whom John 1: 14 reveals has become flesh. Baptism opens us to the nearness of the divine Source of the evolving cosmos. Baptism, reconciling us with the immanent Creator, fulfills, transforms, and elevates evolution through its human (genus? species?) outcome.

No less, affirmation of the immanent Creator renews dispositions in the Eucharist. The twin Offertory prayers, “Blessed are You, Lord God of creation,” over bread and wine connote \textit{creatio ex nihilo}. To arrive at immanence due to creating is to recognize that existing already is a
being-blessed by the Creator Who is in us and all creatures. Blessing the Creator for bread and wine invokes the present not absent Creator. Physical gifts of bread and wine gesture not only to cultivated wheat, grapes, and agriculture but also more broadly to all of nature and the cosmos. The Offertory educates people’s intentions in the humility of creaturely community with all whose essence is not existence. Creaturehood underlies Eucharistic Prefaces beginning in creaturely gratitude, “It is right and just, our duty and our salvation always and everywhere to give you thanks.”

Divine immanence encourages liturgical signs of the Church’s respect for the planetary and cosmic dimension of Christ’s redemption. Blessing water, bread and wine, oil, and many other things already gestures toward the evolved physical cosmos as the ‘primary sacrament’. Why not a Mass with proper prayers, Preface, and Eucharistic Prayer oriented to God in all creation? Might the positive reference to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin in Laudato si encourage liturgists to take a cue from Chardin’s Mass on the World?

Preface V of the Sundays in Ordinary Time takes a short step in that direction, praying to the Father, “For you laid the foundations of the world and arranged the changing of times and seasons.” However quaint this biblical imagery, Preface V looks to earth’s Creator as do sentences in Eucharistic Prayers II and IV. Focus on immanence lets these prayers be understood to praise the Creator present in not absent from the cosmos. Dispositions open to the omnipresent nearness of God to cosmos, nature, evolution, and self cannot but be conducive to sacramental efficacy.
1 Catechism of the Catholic Church, Part Two, Section One, Chapter One, Article Two, n. 1124, at http://www.vatican.va/archive/ccc_css/archive/catechism/p2s1c1a2.htm (accessed June 15, 2016).

2 Catechism of the Catholic Church, n. 124.

3 Though focused on lex orandi, Kevin W. Irwin allows for dynamic mutuality between orandi and credendi in Models of the Eucharist (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2005), 20–21, 25–26, adding lex vivendi, 30.


10 Elizabeth Johnson, *Ask the Beasts: Darwin and the God of Love* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), 200, and “the God of his [Jesus’s] heart was the Creator of heaven and earth,” 201.


18 Soskice, “Creatio ex nihilo,” 35.


20 Clifford, “Creation,” 221.


24 Rocca, “‘Creatio Ex Nihilo’,” 14.

26 Rocca, “‘Creatio Ex Nihilo’,” 7.

27 Johnson, Ask the Beasts 145, likewise appeals to ST Ia, Q. 8, 1, interpreting “God” as the Holy Spirit. See also Denis Edwards, The Breath of Life: A Theology of the Creator Spirit (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2004). Somehow the (enfleshed) Logos and Spirit act together in creating, Logos as source of being, Spirit of becoming?


29 Aquinas, Summa Theologiae, McDermott trans., Ia, Q. 8, a. 1, ad primum, 113.

30 Ibid., ad tertium, 113.

31 Ibid., ad secundum, 113.

33 Ibid., 44.

34 Ibid., 41.

35 Ibid., 43.

36 Ibid., 40.


38 Irwin, on “Cosmic Mass,” 39–66.


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