

Two Trains Passing in the Night: A Response to Thomas Finger

by Dennis Martin

Professor Finger has quite rightly recognized that the heart of Catholic sacramental understandings is foreign to Anabaptist and even to most Mennonite understandings of how God relates to people. He has done a heroic job of stretching each side to its limits and bringing them together in a sort of shotgun wedding, placing at the end of the paper symbolic wedding rings on the fingers of the “highest” Anabaptist sacramental theology, that of Pilgram Marpeck,¹ and on the fingers of a “horizontalized” Catholic-*manqué* theology of transignification. The resultant ecumenical “marriage” is most fragile, because the Catholic partner generated for this purpose lacks sufficient authenticity.

But I wish to be very clear that this state of affairs is not entirely Thomas Finger’s fault. The stubborn refusal by large segments of the European and American (both South and North American) Catholic intellectuals to admit that their revisionist efforts of the 1960s and 1970s have been rejected and the persistent presentation by Catholic academics of the “Catholic-Lite” theology as if it were fully Catholic would be enough to confuse anyone who has not made a serious study of the last generation of Catholic theologians.

¹Itself a marginal position among Mennonites--as Finger himself notes in the Anabaptist section of the paper, the dominant Anabaptist position was that an ontological chasm separated God and created things, spirit and matter. This assessment I wholeheartedly endorse. But that makes Marpeck the odd man out.

Yet it is a fact that the Catholic sacramental theologians on whom Finger draws, presumably largely unwittingly, represent a marginal position explicitly condemned by Paul VI wherever it might be presented as a sufficient and authentic account of Catholic teaching on the Eucharist.² Finger hopes that the revisionist “low church” Catholicism he has selected might find some intersection with Mennonite *Lebenspraxis*. But the result is Mennonite practice in conversation with an incomplete and misleading -- even pseudo-Catholic -- doctrine. Catholics too have *Lebenspraxis*, a practice that is derived from and corresponds to Catholic doctrine. To avoid comparing apples and oranges one would need to bring Catholic practice and Mennonite practice, authentic Catholic doctrine and integral Mennonite doctrine into conversation. Unfortunately the paper fails to do this.

Professor Finger begins his paper by taking as his interlocutor the “horizontal” and “communal” revisionism on the Eucharist offered by Bernard Cooke, Juan Luis Segundo and others, a revisionism decisively rejected by Paul VI in 1965. From Tad Guzie and others Finger draws only such formulations as accord with horizontal and communal revisionism. He recognizes the marginality of these positions, noting that “it *may seem* that current Catholic theology is shifting sharply from the vertical to the horizontal, and from theological to anthropological, philosophical, and social-science starting points” (section I.E, emphasis added). Yet, despite his further claim that “basic Catholic doctrines are also playing a vital role,” the section which follows still draws only on selective phrases from Schillebeeckx and Rahner which do not place into context language about the Church as “primary sacrament.”

Now, is this not an unfairly harsh judgment? Has the “communal” and “horizontal” sacramental theology of the Catholic theologians to whom Professor Finger turns for his Catholic

²See *Mysterium Fidei*, # 11 (http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/paul_vi/encyclicals/hf_p-vi_enc_03091965), quoted below.

interlocutors truly been rejected by the Catholic magisterium? In his encyclical, *Mysterium Fidei*, in 1965, Paul VI wrote (at no. 11):

“ . . . it is not allowable to emphasize what is called ‘the communal’ Mass to the disparagement of Masses celebrated in private, or to exaggerate the element of sacramental sign as if the symbolism, which all certainly admit in the Eucharist, expresses fully and exhausts completely the mode of Christ’s presence in this sacrament. Nor is it allowable to discuss the mystery of transubstantiation without mentioning what the Council of Trent stated about the marvelous conversion of the whole substance of the bread into the Body and of the whole substance of the wine into the Blood of Christ, speaking rather only of what is called ‘transignification’ and ‘transfinalization,’ or, finally to propose and act upon the opinion according to which, in the Consecrated Hosts which remain after the celebration of the sacrifice of the Mass, Christ Our Lord is no longer present.”

As the Second Vatican Council sat, the open challenge to the doctrine of transubstantiation, to the fundamentally vertical, *ex opere operato* understanding of the Eucharist, and to the Mass as a propitiatory sacrifice, a challenge presented by American and Dutch theologians, loomed as the elephant in the living room. Paul VI responded with the encyclical *Mysterium Fidei* (1965), which once more reasserted the classic teaching on the Eucharist and flatly rejected the revisionists’ effort to mount an end run around Trent. Yet, *Mysterium Fidei* did not end efforts by some Catholic theologians to push the envelope and find ways of talking about sacraments that bypass some of the crucial Catholic teachings. Thus we see Josef Ratzinger, now Benedict XVI, forced to rehearse the history of the revisionist challenge and to repeat yet again the verdict that “transignification” is true as far as it goes but can at best

be considered a helpful preliminary point of departure for an authentic Catholic theology of the Eucharistic transformation.³

It should by now be clear that a non-Catholic wishing to enter into dialogue with Catholic sacramental theology cannot simply select a handful of contemporary self-proclaimed Catholic *theologians* writing on sacraments. Sadly, given the confused state of purported Catholic theologizing since the council, one first has to ask whether the sacramental theology presented by Theologians A, B, and X fairly and accurately represents settled Catholic doctrine or not. If not, then engaging it might be a valuable project but it will not be helpful if one's goal is to interact with Catholic teaching.⁴

Further developing a low Catholic sacramental theology that he hopes holds promise for Mennonite engagement, Finger notes that “priests now usually face the congregation” and that “[a]ltars are often placed far enough forward that communicants can gather around them and share the kiss of peace before receiving the elements.” Yet nothing in Catholic liturgical rubrics

³For a popular statement, see Ratzinger, *God Is Near Us: The Eucharist, the Heart of Life*, trans. Henry Taylor (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), pp. 87-88, with references to several important articles.

⁴One must pay some attention here to the scale of time. The forty years after Vatican II and the “reconsideration of the ways in which sacraments need to be explained’ in today’s world” that Professor Finger refers to at the outset of his paper, represent a mere blip on the 2000 year history of Catholicism. One can point to dozens of periods of about forty years, a generation, in which this or that trend was touted as “necessary” if the Church was to adapt to whatever pressing question was uppermost in people’s minds, only to realize, after that particular generation passed from the scene, how time-bound and transitory the particular “burning” need was. That the generation of Catholic revisionists between 1960-2000 who serve as the heart of Professor Finger’s case has failed to make a lasting mark on Catholic theology is evident to anyone who has been monitoring developments among Catholics since 1985, when a certain Josef Ratzinger became the first high-ranking prelate to admit openly that the council’s reforms had been hijacked and that a reform-of-the reform needed to begin. A period of confusion and dispute always accompanies a major council (e.g., after Nicea, ca. 325-375) and Ratzinger was simply asking people to settle down and pay attention to the real reforms of Vatican II. When Josef Ratzinger was elected Bishop of Rome in April 2005, twenty years later, forty years after the close of Vatican II, the one thing one could with certainty say about the significance of his election is that the cardinals, knowing full well Ratzinger’s conviction that things had seriously gone off the rails after 1965, were endorsing a final and clearcut end to the claim that the Dutch theologians and the Segundos and Bernard Cookes represented the proper “Spirit of Vatican II.” It will take another twenty years for the die-hard “progressives” to fold their tents, but the handwriting has been on the wall for twenty years already.

requires that the priest face the congregation,⁵ and the fact that the preference for this placement of the altar was based on a misreading of the historical evidence⁶ constituted a major element in Josef Cardinal Ratzinger's call, beginning in 1985, for a "reform of the reform," including a revalorization of celebration *ad orientem*. Having parishioners gather around the altar prior to receiving Communion has been repeatedly condemned as one of the liturgical abuses against which John Paul II's *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* and the subsequent disciplinary document, *Redemptionis sacramentum* (March 25, 2004), were aimed.⁷ Space does not permit a point-by-point argument to show that the premises enunciated in Professor Finger's sections I.A-C represent a discredited and marginal thrust of Catholic theologizing over the past generation. The "postmodern" moves of section I.D are, typical for postmodern moves, capable of a wide variety of interpretations: they can be harmonized entirely with the depths of the traditional Catholic teaching on the mystery of the Eucharist or they can, if one wishes, be harmonized with the "horizontalists"--though I would think that the latter harmonization is more difficult than the former.

Thomas Finger's paper makes no references at all to the decrees of the Council of Trent, to the Denzinger-Schönmetzger collection of dogmatic teachings, to Paul VI's *Mysterium Fidei*

⁵It was not even mentioned in *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (December 4, 1963; http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html), the first of the Vatican II documents, and *Inter Oecumenici* (Sept. 26, 1964, the document implementing the *Sacrosanctum Concilium* [<http://www.adoremus.org/Interoecumenici.html>]), nos. 91-92, states that "where possible" the altar should be freestanding so the priest can face the people.

⁶Klaus Gamber, *The Reform of the Roman Liturgy: Its Problems and Background*, trans. by Klaus D. Grimm (San Juan Capistrano, Cal.: Una Voce Press and Harrison, N.Y.: The Foundation for Catholic Reform, 1993). See, most recently, Uwe Michael Lang, *Turning towards the Lord: Orientation in Liturgical Prayer* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2004) (originally *Conversi ad Dominum. Zu Geschichte und Theologie der christlichen Gebetsrichtung* (Einsiedeln, Switzerland: Johannes Verlag)

⁷April 2003: *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, found at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/special_features/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_20030417_ecclesia_eucharistia_en.html; http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccdds/documents/rc_con_ccdds_doc_20040423_redemptionis-sacramentum_en.html.

(which would have immediately engaged the integrated trajectory from Ambrose, Chrysostom and Augustine through to Aquinas, Trent) or to John Paul II's restatement of Vatican II and *Mysterium Fidei*, with his own characteristic emphases, in *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*. Not only does it bypass these central sources, but it takes as its Catholic interlocutors precisely those Dutch, American, and other theologians whose positions were condemned in *Mysterium Fidei*. This undermines the entire project of a Mennonite engaging Catholic sacramental theology. It cannot lead to meaningful Catholic-Mennonite dialogue.

In a certain sense, the “horizontal” and “communal” emphasis that the revisionists of the 1960s and following so emphasized represents a revival of the position held by some of the Protestant Reformers, namely that reception by the believing community constitutes the sacraments’ efficacy. While this may seem a good starting point because it bypasses thorny claims for the “vertical” efficacy central to Catholic teaching on the sacraments, any dialogue between Mennonites and a Catholic “low-church” “communal/horizontal” meal understanding of the Eucharist is in fact a dialogue between Mennonites and protestantized Catholics, between Mennonites and those Catholics who, despite repeated admonitions to the contrary, persist in proposing “reforms” to Catholic doctrine that were already presented and decisively rejected in the sixteenth century.

Of course, from a Mennonite perspective (and, interestingly enough, for many revisionist, “Spirit of Vatican II” Catholic theologians), Trent erred. But Trent on sacraments was reaffirmed again and again, at Vatican II, by Paul VI in 1965, by John Paul II in 2003. In the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* the “communal meal” theme does not even appear in the main section on the Eucharist (nos. 1322-1405), as the “Source and Summit of Ecclesial Life.”⁸

⁸Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 3: “The Church was born of the paschal mystery. For this very reason the Eucharist, which is in an outstanding way the sacrament of the paschal mystery, *stands as the centre of the Church’s life*” (emphasis in original). This theme is repeated, e.g., in no. 7

Precisely because revisionist Catholic theologians were denying or ignoring the teaching that the Eucharist is an expiatory sacrifice for sin, one of the handful of revisions made to the initial edition of the *Catechism* (1994) when the *editio typica* was issued in 1997 was to add to no. 1367, the sentence: “this sacrifice is truly propitiatory.”⁹ The relevant footnote (no. 188) then was expanded to include an explicit citation to Trent, *Doctrina de ss. Missae sacrificio*, ch. 2, alongside note 188’s existing reference to Hebrews 9:14, 27.

Not only does one find no “horizontal” communal emphasis in the *Catechism*, but the “banquet” nature of the Eucharist (no. 1382¹⁰) is explicitly explained vertically: the Eucharist unites those who receive in the most marvelous way, the Eucharist indeed “makes the Church” (no. 1396¹¹). Precisely because one truly receives Christ himself (no. 1383)¹² and because receiving Holy Communion separates from sin (no. 1393), removing venial sins and preserving against mortal sin, the sacrament itself is church-constituting, rather than the church community constituting the Eucharist. But, this belief can only be maintained if the sacraments function by Christ’s own institution *ex opere operato*, that is, only if the sacraments, simply by being accomplished, bring about that which they signify, rather than being dependent for their efficacy on the actions or intentions of the recipients.¹³

Even if one has good reasons for bypassing the official documents in favor of contemporary theologians, then at the very least one should select broadly across the spectrum of

⁹Cf. John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 11-13, with relevant citations to Scripture and the Tradition.

¹⁰See John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 16.

¹¹See the entire chapter 2, nos. 21-25, of John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*.

¹²See John Paul II, *Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, no. 15 regarding transubstantiation.

¹³ Catholic theology does recognize a role for the recipients’ disposition, an *ex opere operantis* aspect: a recipient lacking belief or consent or willing disposition cannot block the sacrament from taking place but, the sacrament having taken place, the degree to which it affects or is applied to the recipient does depend on the degree of his receptivity and willing disposition.

Catholic theologians. Yet in Finger's article I find missing the Regensburg or Munich school (Ratzinger and his students, Gerhard Ludwig Müller at Munich etc.) or the work of Aidan Nichols¹⁴ and others in the Anglo-American sphere, while present front and center are the revisionist Americanist and Dutch "schools." A body of Catholic theologians exists "out there" who are not trying to see how far they can nuance the official doctrine of transubstantiation in favor of transignification or transfinalization or equivalent terms. If one wishes to bypass the definitive magisterial statements of the Catholic Church, why not at least engage both ends of the spectrum of Catholic private theologians? Why use only the formulas that have been formally rejected as true but unhelpfully inadequate?

If Mennonites are to engage Catholic understandings of sacraments, the main issues surrounding sacraments need to be addressed: in what manner do sacraments function *ex opere operato*, in what way *ex opere operantis*; in what sense is the Eucharist the sacrifice of Christ on the Cross? On these issues, Mennonites de facto differ sharply with Catholics even if most Mennonites are not aware that such issues exist. I think it fair to say that, if presented with the Catholic understanding of Eucharistic sacrifice or of the *ex opere operato* efficacy of sacraments, most Mennonites would quickly and firmly reject the Catholic belief. Here is where the Catholic and Mennonite disagreements center and here is where the conversation needs to begin--not as a debate but as genuine effort to understand what Mennonites and Catholics believe about these issues and why they believe what they believe.

These are not merely technical differences. Behind the stubborn insistence by the Catholic *magisterium* that the Eucharist is a propitiatory sacrifice that happens *ex opere operato*

¹⁴*The Holy Eucharist* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1991); for some popular addresses by Josef Ratzinger one might consult *God Is Near Us*, though the current Holy Father has obviously addressed the topic at a wide variety of levels in countless publications. He is also thoroughly conversant with the writings of Luther and the other Protestant Reformers and thus teaches from an explicitly ecumenical perspective.

lies the difference between ancient and modern understandings of worship, and therefore, a difference between ancient and modern *Lebenspraxis*. In other words, even if one chooses to begin a Mennonite-Catholic conversation on the sacraments at the level of practice rather than doctrine, the first thing one must realize about Catholic practice is that it is a fundamentally pre-modern, cultic, sacrificial practice rooted in the claim that the stupendous history-altering event of God's incarnation in Christ remains equally stupendously life-altering--objectively so--in the sacraments of baptism, confession, Eucharist, marriage, ordination etc.

I am convinced that nothing united Anabaptists, apart from rejecting infant baptism, more than acute iconoclasm -- in other words, nothing united Anabaptists more than their rejection of the pre-modern cultic and their embrace of the modern rational-sociological worship practice.¹⁵ I cannot argue this case here, but one ought at least to consider fundamental issues of iconoclasm, ritual efficacy, and cultic character in assessing Mennonite and Catholic practice. I do think that

¹⁵ A brief, popularly accessible statement about the shortcomings of the "horizontal" and rationalizing-sociological approach to worship that vitiated much post-conciliar Catholic parish life may be found in Francis Cardinal George's address on the fortieth anniversary of *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, "The Foundations of Liturgical Reform," available at <http://www.adoremus.org/0304CardinalGeorgeSC40th.html>. Cardinal George makes the following points: Liturgical renewal after the Council focused too much on change without considering what happens when a community's symbol system is disrupted. Theologically considered, the actors (subjects) in the celebration of the liturgy, of the Eucharist are the Holy Trinity, all the host of heaven (angels and heavenly powers) and the entire Church, including all the Christians in heaven and on earth.. George comments that "In the postconciliar period, a limited understanding of the 'People of God' has often led to a limited, horizontal concept of the subject (actors) of the Liturgy"--an indication that the "horizontal" Catholic sacramental theology adduced in Professor Finger's papers is rejected not only by Paul VI and Benedict XVI, but by the leading American prelate who, were it not for his nationality, would have been eminently *papabile* in the conclave of April 2005. George continues, noting that the earthly liturgy participates in the heavenly liturgy by synergy of the divine and the human: both the Holy Spirit and the Church work together (synergy). Men and women who participate in the Liturgy (human subjects, actors, of the Liturgy) should do so, according to St. Paul, with body, soul, spirit, mind, heart etc., that is, with the whole person. Yet the Enlightenment of the 1600s and 1700s, however, reduced man largely to reason as a source of understanding. In reaction, the Romantic movement of the 1800s overemphasized feelings and emotions. As a result, many people in the 20th century have tended to emphasize either rational understanding or emotional involvement as essential for participation in the Liturgy. Instead, Cardinal George insists, one needs to employ all of the following: reason, feelings, emotions, intuitions and the five senses of the body to participate fully. Cultural anthropology has shed much light on how symbols and rituals are essential to human health and well-being. A ritual assembly has to follow a complex set of rules and roles if it is to work. Too much spontaneity and on-the-spot adaptation, too much wordiness explaining ad hoc changes, undermines the power of the ritual. Ritual actions depend more on symbols and symbolic actions than words.

one might find actual points of intersection in the “second-generation” Mennonite “catholicizing” tendencies toward unspoken ritual and mediatory leadership.¹⁶

What do I mean by premodern and cultic? I will try to state it as clearly as possible: the Catholic sacraments, most notably the Eucharist but also the other sacraments, represent traditional cultic understandings of worship offered to God. Christ himself, as both priest and victim, quite literally offers himself each time the Eucharist is celebrated, in a re-presentation of his sacrifice on the Cross. My undergraduate Catholic students often are surprised when I tell them that nothing in the liturgical rubrics requires a free-standing altar with the priest facing the people (which means that Professor Finger’s ignorance on this point should be understood as totally without blame or shame). One may, and in my Chicago parish, we do, legitimately celebrate Mass *ad orientem*, even the vernacular Novus Ordo, to say nothing of the Latin Novus Ordo and Tridentine rites. Why? Because the focus of the Eucharist in traditional Catholic theology is God, not the community. The community assembles and, largely non-vocally, speaking with one voice through the mediatory voice and actions of the priest, who stands at the head of the assembled throng and acts in *persona Christi*, joins Christ himself as Christ offers himself for our sins.

This comes as a shock to most contemporary Catholic students but it remains the clear theology of the Catholic Church. And it makes perfect sense in an ancient, traditional Jewish-

¹⁶See my “Nothing New Under the Sun: Mennonites and History,” *Conrad Grebel Review* 5 (Winter, 1987) 1-27, with responses pp. 147-53, 260-62, with additional commentary and modifications in “Retrospect and Apologia,” *Mennonite Quarterly Review* 77.2 (April 2003), 167-195. Unfortunately, this de facto Mennonite re-Catholicizing, this unwritten reuniting of nature and grace, spirit and matter during in the “Mennonite” second generation hung suspended in mid-air, lacking the necessary ecclesiology to support it. Thus, when the rural subculture collapsed, this unthematized “Menno-catholicism” on created vehicles of grace gave way to a very modern, sociologically- and anthropologically-based non-cultic, anti-sacramental approach, ornamented, to be sure, with new liturgical symbols cherry-picked from the liturgical Christian communions. This is a very postmodern move, a movement of appropriation. Unless the underlying Catholic and Orthodox ecclesiology is authentically integrated, this superficial liturgical symbolism will merely hang in mid-air the way Mennonite rituals did for two or three hundred years

Christian framework: liturgical worship is not cerebral or sociological projection, sacramental worship is not ad hoc or spontaneous “creative” invention, but arises from cultic ritual acts, authorized by the very Creator who commands worship of himself. In the Catholic understanding of the Sacrifice of the Mass we see a direct continuation, via a radical fulfillment, of the ancient Jewish temple sacrifices, which is exactly what the Letter to the Hebrews would lead one to believe. Yes, indeed, the Incarnation absolutely transformed this into the bloodless sacrifice of the New Covenant, but not by making it modern (not by making it merely symbolic or merely communal thought-sharing, not by making it merely the ad hoc variable expression of a sociological grouping). Rather, the Incarnation, death and Resurrection of Jesus the Christ accomplished this fulfillment and transformation of Jewish cult by retaining all the ancient cultic assumptions while pouring new meaning into them. Both Eastern Orthodox and Catholic worship and sacramental theology retain these ancient, traditional, and very Jewish, elements. The Protestant Reformers eliminated some or all of them, depending on where on the spectrum a particular reformer located himself. Luther retained major elements; Karlstadt rejected most (to which Luther responded in outrage) as did the Anabaptists.

This comes to a head in the question of Eucharistic sacrifice,¹⁷ but subsumed within that is the *ex opere operato* efficacy and real, substantial presence of Christ, a presence far more powerful, perfect, and transformative than the other ways Christ is present in the community at worship. When I began teaching a general introduction to Catholicism four years ago I hammered away hardest, perhaps, on the fact that the theology of the Sacrifice of the Mass was not abandoned at Vatican II¹⁸ because it was my perception that de facto it had largely

¹⁷Francis Clark, *Eucharistic Sacrifice and the Reformation* (Westminster, Md.: Newman Press, 1960; 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1967).

¹⁸Indeed, one can scarcely fail to notice how explicitly it was reaffirmed in the introduction to *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and in a number of the post-conciliar instructions on the correct implementation of the reforms, e.g., in the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal* of 1970, foreword no. 2, and in the main body, no. 2.

disappeared from popular Catholic consciousness in the poorly catechized typical suburban Catholic parish. I have noticed, over the past four years a slow crescendo of emphasis on the Sacrifice of the Mass emanating above all from the Ratzinger-led Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. It was underlined in John Paul II's encyclical on the Eucharist in 2003 and has featured prominently in a number of statements by Benedict XVI since his election. In other words, my perception that the last several decades of popular Catholicism in the West were marked by a protestantizing de-emphasis on the propitiatory Sacrifice of the Mass is not unique to me. It seems to have captured the attention of the last two popes as well. For that reason, it needs to figure prominently in any Catholic-Mennonite conversation. But behind it lies an ancient, propitiatory, "vertical," understanding of human worship offered to God in contrast to a horizontal, assembly-centered, communal, modernistic understanding of worship as, in the end, human projection.¹⁹

Nor was the deemphasizing of traditional, ancient cultic aspects in favor of modern, sociologizing horizontalism accidental. Rejection of the cultic, propitiatory Sacrifice of the Mass doctrine was one of the few issues on which all Protestants agreed in the sixteenth century and its reaffirmation at Trent represented the considered and firm decision by the Catholic Church to retain a traditional and ancient approach.

To be sure, the Eastern Orthodox do not use the same Western sacrifice *language*, but the *principle* is just as deeply embedded in their liturgy, and their entire approach to sacraments is

¹⁹And postmodernism simply takes human projection to the extreme, legitimizing what it calls "translation" or "appropriation," which really means one is free to use whatever one chooses from any text or tradition or culture and make of it whatever one wants with no pangs of conscience because no real Text or Meaning exists anyway. If all "meaning" is socially constructed, then I can lay my grubby little hands on anyone's text or customs or beliefs, use them any way I please and celebrate this rape of the Other because it's all that any of us ever *can* do. To think otherwise is to be foolishly naive, to believe simplistically that texts and cultures and beliefs actually have objective meanings.

equally ancient, cultic, vertical, transcendent, and traditional rather than modern or postmodern “appropriatively,” “transgressively,” or “translatively” sociological.

Still, one might ask why, in light of the obviously huge gulf between Catholics and Mennonites on these central issues, can one not begin with things less centrally controversial? Because the more peripheral issues derive from the central issues, which is why the central issues were central in the sixteenth century and remain so today. That many who consider themselves Catholic have never encountered the teaching on the Mass as a salvific and propitiary representation of Christ’s once-for-all sacrifice only underscores the disarray among Catholics and in no sense moves this and *ex opere operato* efficacy from the center to the margins of Catholic doctrine.

And that leads back to a more fundamental matter. Catholics and Mennonites have to address--honestly--what fundamentally separates them, namely, the nature of the Church. The Catholic approach to sacraments, to ordination, priesthood, women’s roles, discipline and authority and so forth all derive from the Catholic claim that Christ established not just an abstract notion of Church but a real, organic, living Body with Christ-established apostolic authority structures as a way to avoid schism and remain whole, remain Catholic. The Catholic principle is that the appointed teaching authority does the definitive reading of the tradition. Individuals are free to develop variations so long as they do not contradict or reject what has already been defined authoritatively. Where controversies emerge over what is authoritatively defined and what is not, it rests with the successors of the Apostles to do the resolving. The centuries-long presentation of that teaching is available in countless documents, nicely drawn together in the documents of Vatican II and the *Catechism*.

Now, Anabaptists had a high view of the Church, grounded in opposition to what they were convinced was a historically falsified Catholic ecclesiology and in their conviction that they

had discovered the historical truth about the Church. In these equally high but opposite views of the Church might lie possibilities for ecumenical conversation, especially since Mennonites, in the face of postmodern assaults, have largely lost confidence in their foundational historical mythology.

Space does not permit specific commentary on Finger's reading of Anabaptist theology of sacraments. I agree that Pilgram Marpeck comes closest to a Catholic belief in objective efficacy, but, if space did permit, I would make a case that he deliberately and decisively stops well short of bridging the gap. And in any case, as noted above, he represents a marginal position in relation to the dominant Anabaptist (and even Mennonite) assumption of an unbridgeable ontological chasm between spirit and matter. Some of Finger's efforts to find historical counterparts to Anabaptists, namely in medieval monasticism or mysticism or in the Brethren of the Common Life are misguided (the latter did not include married persons). Moreover, medieval monks are not helpful as a bridge. They fully embraced the classic Catholic sacramental theology and ecclesiology and are misunderstood if interpreted as seeing themselves as some sort of *ecclesiola in ecclesia* or proto-Anabaptist purist sect within the larger Church.²⁰

Talk of "relocating sacramentality from the church into the world" makes no sense given a Catholic understanding of Church and world, an understanding in which kings and queens, peasants and bishops, monks and married folk all had their central role in the Church's life in the

²⁰I have to some degree dealt with this in my book on the Carthusian monk, Nicholas Kempf, who quite matter-of-factly begins his treatise on mystical or contemplative union with Christ with a deep grounding in the sacraments of baptism and confession and who explains that far from being an exotic, elite life within the Church, the monastic life is for the weak, who need the crutch of a rule to live the very same life of the sacraments that lay people in the world lead. The path of salvation is identical for both monastics and non-monastics and it is found entirely in the sacraments. Monks employ a different context to achieve the same goal. They live in the Church and in her sacraments, lay people live in the Church and in her sacraments. See *Fifteenth-Century Carthusian Reform: The World of Nicholas Kempf*, Studies in the History of Christian Thought, 49 (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992), e.g., ch. 5 on the continuum between basic sacramental union with Christ and contemplative union in *De ostensione regni De*.

world--an integrated Church-world understanding that left no room for “relocating” anything from or to anywhere. This was possible precisely because the sacraments transformed nature by grace. The opposition of nature and grace implicit in Anabaptist assumptions about iconoclasm, sectarianism, church-world dichotomy, pacifism, Constantinian fall-of-the-church etc. simply represents a new (modern) view of nature and grace that casts serious doubt on the entire Catholic understanding of sacraments. In other words, now that the second-generation Menno-catholic subculture²¹ has been dissolved by the acids of the homogenizing “technique” of the modern state (Jacques Ellul; George Parkin Grant), the conventional “ontological barrier” reading of what animated the Anabaptists, in my view, has reasserted itself, and, as such, represents the fundamental hurdle that a Mennonite conversation with Catholics on sacraments will need to overcome.

But here is not the place for such specifics. The central point remains: to begin with a particular (rejected) stream of “Catholic” belief because it accords more closely to Mennonite beliefs is to converse with one’s Mennonite self, disguised superficially in “Catholic” garb. One quite legitimately may cherry-pick among the various Mennonite subcategories and affinity groups, but such cherry-picking is the one thing that cannot be done with Catholicism because only a stubborn (often ridiculed) persistence in defining what may and what may not be held as the *Catholic* faith has kept the constantly recurring centrifugal forces within Catholicism from spinning out of control into denominational fragmentation. And precisely because the ancient-and-ever-new Mystery of God’s grace-filled action in the sacraments is so central and so rich, controversies have repeatedly arisen, leading to a solid body of settled teaching on the

²¹See “Nothing New under the Sun” for references to Levi Miller’s “I am a Mennonite, not an Anabaptist” manifesto of what I call “Menno-catholic” subculture. See also Robert Baker’s “My Good Bishop” as a feature article in *Mennonite Encyclopedia*, 5:86-88 (originally published in *Gospel Herald* [Feb. 24, 1987], 126-27) for another example of what I mean by this term.

sacraments. That is what Bridgefolk must engage if a genuine ecumenical conversation is ever to begin.

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