

Rites of Remission

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Abstract: The texts of ancient liturgies of the Christian East repeatedly state that activities such as taking eucharist, baptizing, and anointing are for the remission of sin. But how could that be? What could the connection be between the performance of these actions, on the one hand, and the state of enjoying remission of sin, on the other? The first step toward providing a satisfactory answer to these questions is to note that, in the context of the liturgy, the phrase "remission of sin" is best understood to mean not forgiveness of sin but *deliverance* from the sin-disorder. With this meaning in mind, I present a model for how rites of certain kinds could be intelligibly understood to be for the remission of sin.

The starting point of my reflections is a prayer found in the script of the Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostomos. In the Litany before the Lord's Prayer, the liturgical script instructs the celebrant to pray:

To You Master, Lover of humankind, we entrust our whole life and hope and we entreat, pray, and implore you: count us worthy to partake of your heavenly and awesome Mysteries ... for remission of sins, for forgiveness of transgressions, for the communion of the Holy Spirit, for the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven, for boldness towards You, but not for judgment or condemnation.¹

The line that interests me—and which is repeated no less than five times in the liturgy—is the one in which the celebrant requests of God that the eating of the eucharist be for the "remission of sins." What interests me about this line, at least initially, is that it does not simply echo Jesus's words in the New Testament. Although the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and Luke all present accounts of Jesus's words at the Last Supper, only Matthew reports Jesus as saying anything at the Last Supper about the remission of sin. What Matthew reports Jesus as saying, however, is not that the partaking of the bread and wine is for the remission of sin, but that

¹ I am using the Thyateira (1995) translation of *The Divine Liturgy of Our Father Among the Saints John Chrysostom*. This translation is also available at http://www.cappellaromana.org/DL_in_English_Booklet_Web.pdf. In what follows, I operate with a distinction between the liturgical script, which is a set of guidelines addressed to a group of people who might participate in the liturgy, and the liturgy itself, which is a sequence of act-types.

his *death* is for the remission of sin.² Likewise, when Paul reports Jesus's words at the Last Supper, Jesus says nothing about sin, let alone that partaking of the Eucharist is for remission of sin (I Corinthians 11:23). By all appearances, then, when the liturgical script says that partaking of the Eucharist is for the remission of sin, it goes beyond anything that is explicitly stated in the Gospels or the epistolary literature.

There might be an explanation for this. When blessing the waters during the baptismal rite, the celebrant prays several times that the water would be for "the remission of sins, the remedy of infirmities."³ The content of this prayer, unlike the prayer quoted above, draws directly from scripture, echoing Peter's injunction in Acts to "Repent, and let every one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for the remission of sin" (Acts 2:38). And yet, in the context of the liturgy, Peter's words about the function of baptism are understood in such a way that they apply equally to other liturgical rites, such as partaking of Eucharist and anointing with oil. Why is that?

Perhaps a comparison will help. In American jurisprudence, certain constitutional provisions are understood to "incorporate" others, the most famous example being that in which portions of the Bill of Rights are understood to apply to the individual states, even though, when drafted, these sections were not so intended. In the case of baptism, a natural suggestion is that the liturgy articulates the church's understanding that, when Peter claims that baptism is for the remission of sin, his claim about baptism's function also applies to other liturgical rites, even though Peter's words make no explicit reference to these other rites. The idea is that much in the way that the Supreme Court has held that certain constitutional provisions incorporate others, so also Peter's pronouncement regarding the purpose of baptism "incorporates" other liturgical activities, such as participating in the Eucharist.⁴ A central aim of all these liturgical activities, under this understanding, is to effect the remission of sin, even if the scriptures explicitly designate only baptizing and anointing for this purpose.

There appears, then, to be a way to explain why the liturgical script would go beyond the scriptural texts, denominating certain activities such as participating in the Eucharist as being for the remission of sin. What puzzles me most about these liturgical pronouncements, however, is not the way in which they creatively extend the scriptural text, but what is said about the effects of these liturgical activities themselves. For it is difficult to see what the connection could be between the

² This passage from Matthew is quoted in the Anaphora of The Divine Liturgy of St. John Chrysostom. The Gospel of John has no account of the Last Supper. Still, after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus says that he is the bread of life and that only those who partake of him have eternal life (John 6:55-58). While most Christians would affirm that there are interesting and intimate connections between having eternal life and the remission of sin, the two states are not identical.

³ *Service Book of the Holy Eastern Orthodox Church* (2002, 155). I will refer to this work as *Service Book* (2002).

⁴ As for anointing the sick, see James 5:14-15. In the rite of the anointing of the sick, the celebrant entreats God to "send down your Holy Spirit and sanctify this oil; and grant that it may bring full pardon from sin to your servant who is anointed" (Meyendorff 2009, 136). The verb used in this prayer is ἀπολύτρωσις, often translated as "release" or "redemption." In Colossians 1:14, it is used as a near synonym for the Greek verb that is translated as "remission."

activities of participating in the Eucharist, baptizing, and anointing with oil, on the one hand, and the state of enjoying remission of sin, on the other. When it comes to the remission of sin, wouldn't *repenting* be the relevant activity? Moreover, the effect that these liturgical activities are said to have—namely, the remission of sin—does not appear to hinge on whether the one who eats, is baptized, or is anointed understands what is being done. In the Eastern tradition, after all, babies and small children are both baptized and participate in the Eucharist; those in advanced states of dementia and comas are anointed. If these activities do effect the remission of sin, they appear to do so (at least in part) at a sub-doxastic level. How they accomplish this, however, is something that is not easy to understand.

Those who wish to understand the underlying *ratio* of the various actions that constitute the liturgy face a task. The task is to try to uncover the rationale or justification for why the liturgy takes the shape it does—why certain things are said, certain actions are performed and understood to have one or another type of significance. In the case at hand, the task is to understand how there could be a close link between taking the Eucharist, baptizing, and anointing, on the one hand, and enjoying remission of sin, on the other. My project in this essay is to try to make headway on this task. I am going to suggest that the text and actions of the liturgy make sense given a certain understanding of our condition, an understanding that is controversial but deeply embedded in the Eastern Christian tradition. While I have no pretensions of dispelling the mystery of how rites such as taking the Eucharist, baptizing, and anointing could contribute to the remission of sin, I think some helpful things can be said on this score too. The key to making sense of these activities, or so I will suggest, is to work with a particular model of human and divine action.

Before diving into our topic, let me first enter a pair of caveats. Like biblical exegesis, interpreting liturgical texts and actions quickly plunges one into a set of complicated issues, in which philological, theological, historical, and philosophical questions intertwine with one another. Since my aims are broadly philosophical, I am not going to pause to explore or defend in detail claims that many of those with broadly philological, theological, or historical interests would, since doing so would often be beyond my competence and distract from my central project, which is to try to make sense of certain aspects of the liturgy. Sometimes it is best to present the model first and then return to defend its more controversial elements! In addition to not giving the full range of issues before us the attention they might deserve, I do not aspire to give anything like the complete story of how liturgical rites could plausibly be understood to have the effects that the liturgy seems to ascribe to them. I wish to present only the main lines of a certain understanding that could be supplemented, modified, and enriched in various ways.

I. Diagnosis

What is being presupposed about our human condition such that it is intelligible to hold that eating, baptizing, and anointing are for the remission of sin? Let me begin

with an observation about the phrase "remission of sin" itself. This phrase is an English translation of a Greek phrase (ἄφεσις αμαρτιῶν/*afesin amartion*) that belongs to a cluster of Greek terms and phrases that can have importantly different meanings and nuances in meaning, many of which are obscured (or even lost) in their English translations. When used in both the scriptures and the liturgy, the Greek terms that are translated as "life" and "death," for example, often communicate much more—and sometimes something entirely different from—physical life and death. Similarly for the Greek counterparts to other English terms such as "salvation," "flesh," "word," "world," and the like.⁵ As I say, my aim here is not primarily philological; it is not to comb biblical scholarship for the purpose of uncovering and comparing the variety of meanings expressed by the phrase "remission of sin," but to make several observations that will guide our discussion.

Begin with the term "remission." The first observation is that, on linguistic grounds alone, when the liturgical text uses the phrase "remission of sin," this phrase is probably best understood not to mean "forgiveness of sin." That it should not is apparent from the prayer quoted in the opening paragraph. In this prayer, recall, the celebrant addresses God, asking that those present be:

worthy to partake of your heavenly and awesome Mysteries ... for remission [ἄφεσις] of sins, for forgiveness [συγχώρησις] of transgressions, for the communion of the Holy Spirit, for the inheritance of the Kingdom of Heaven, for boldness towards You, but not for judgment or condemnation.

Note that when this prayer lists the hoped-for results of partaking of the Mysteries—the Mysteries being the Eastern church's counterpart to the sacraments—it does not offer a list of states and activities that are simply slight variants or subspecies of the other. Instead, it lists a series of states—such as forgiveness of transgressions, communion of the Holy Spirit, inheritance of the kingdom, and boldness toward God—that are related in a variety of interesting but importantly different ways. Given that this is so, we should probably not interpret "remission" and "forgiveness," in this context, to be mere notational variants of one another, as some translators of biblical passages do.⁶ These terms, after all, are the English translations of different Greek terms, which in this context appear to designate different states. To treat them otherwise would be to ignore the differences to which the liturgical script seems to be drawing our attention.

But if "remission of sin" does not mean "forgiveness of sin" in this context, how should we understand this phrase? In colloquial English, "remit" has strong economic or legal connotations; we speak, for example, of being required to remit payment for a service provided. While present, these connotations are not nearly as pronounced in the biblical and Patristic use of the Greek ἄφεσις, the term that is

⁵ When, for example, the prayers of the church address God as the "salvation of both humans and beasts," it's clear that they incorporate an understanding of the meaning of the term "salvation" that is much broader than is often thought. See McGuckin (2011, 118).

⁶ The *New Zondervan Parallel New Testament in Greek and English* (1975), for example, repeatedly translates ἄφεσις as "forgiveness."

translated as "remission." In fact, my Greek-English lexicons tell me that the Greek term ἄφεσις admits of a broad range of uses, many of which are captured by a cluster of English phrases such as "letting go," "release," and "leaving."⁷ Given this and a broader theological framework about which I shall have more to say in a moment, let me offer the following proposal: when used in the liturgy, the phrase "remission of sin" is best rendered as something along the lines of *being released or liberated from the grip of sin*. The phrase probably communicates a good deal more than this, but its focal meaning, I want to suggest, lies in this vicinity. I would immediately add that whether this is the best understanding of the phrase is not something that can be settled simply by consulting Greek-English lexicons. It will only be vindicated by how well it comports with and makes sense of the rest of the liturgical script and the liturgical actions that accompany it. Holism, in this case, is the right approach.

The second observation I would like to make concerns the use, not of the term "remission," but "sin" (ἁμαρτία/*amartia*). Surprisingly often, sin is understood simply to be a derelict moral condition, something akin to state of moral guilt. In his book *Responsibility and Atonement*, for example, Richard Swinburne identifies sin with a "failure of duty to God" (1989, 124). George Hunsinger maintains that "sin is basically a matter of guilt and of the will's bondage consequent upon this guilt" (2000, 250). And in one of the most perceptive treatments of sin of which I'm aware, Cornelius Plantinga writes of sin "as ... the *power* in human beings that has the effect ... of corrupting human thought, word, and deed so that they displease God and make their authors guilty" (1995, 13, n. 10).

I am not making a novel contribution by noting that these passages express an extraordinarily pinched understanding of what sin is. In the Eastern Christian tradition, the state is ordinarily understood much more broadly to be a state of deep disorder, which has moral, legal, aesthetic, and therapeutic dimensions, some of these dimensions being such that they needn't imply that an agent who suffers from them is morally guilty in virtue of suffering from them. The agent who suffers from this deep disorder might, for example, view the world in deeply distorted ways or desire what would be his destruction (even though he does not act on this desire). But that he views the world in these ways or is in the grip of these desires needn't imply that he is morally derelict in virtue of viewing the world in these ways or being in the grip of these desires. Not all disorder is morally culpable.

A helpful way to appreciate these non-moral dimensions of sin is to bring to mind the positive counterpart of sin, which I take to be not innocence or goodness but *holiness*—a state that the liturgy repeatedly ascribes to God, which also has moral, legal, aesthetic, and therapeutic dimensions. As the Christian tradition describes God, God is the Holy One. The Holy One, in turn, is the one without guile, taint, or disorder—the one who is characterized by perfection that transcends all blemish, taint, disorder, and defilement.⁸ Although some theologians have been keen to moralize holiness, viewing it simply as a moral quality, this tendency has not been

⁷ See, for example, Thayer (1996), Liddell and Scott (1996), and Lampe (1969). I thank Mark Montague for his help on these matters of translation.

⁸ This is the gloss offered by Wolterstorff (2015, 36).

strong; most have understood holiness to be a state with multiple normative dimensions. Why has the tendency to moralize its negative counterpart, sin, been so prominent in the Western Christian tradition? Nice question!

Suppose we pull together our reflections on the liturgical use of the term "remission" with those of the liturgical use of "sin." The conclusion to which we're led is that when the people pray that activities such as eating, baptizing, and anointing be for the remission of sin, this should be understood as requesting that these activities be for the release from the sin-disorder in its various manifestations, including its broadly therapeutic dimensions. The petition, to say it again, is not a request to be forgiven for being in the grip of this disorder. It is rather a plea to be *delivered from* its grip.

That this is a helpful way to understand these prayers emerges, I believe, when one digs deeper into the liturgical texts themselves. For it is a striking feature of these texts that they highlight the broadly therapeutic dimensions of sin by repeatedly coupling the theme of sin with those of health and wholeness. The text of the Trisagion Prayers, which are used extensively in the Eastern church, for example, runs:

All-Holy Trinity, have mercy on us. Lord, forgive us our sins. Master, pardon our transgressions. Holy One, visit and heal our infirmities for your name's sake (McGuckin 2011, 8).

That these infirmities are not merely bodily is manifest when one consults other texts, such as the pre-communion prayers, in which participants in the liturgy pray that the Mysteries be for both "the remission of sin" and for "the healing of soul and body."⁹ These prayers are, in turn, followed by the post-communion prayers, in which, once again, the themes of remission of sin and healing of the self are conjoined:

O Lord Jesus Christ, my God, let your holy body be my eternal life, and your precious blood, the remission of my sins. May this eucharist be my joy, my health, and my gladness (McGuckin 2011, 160).

And to quote more fully a passage cited earlier from the baptismal rite, the celebrant prays that the baptismal water would be "the water of redemption, the water of sanctification, the purification of flesh and spirit, the loosing of bonds, the remission of sins, the remedy of infirmities" (*Service Book* 2002, 155).¹⁰ Finally, the prayers that compose the Lenten liturgies repeatedly and vividly employ therapeutic imagery. These prayers refer to the church as a "house of healing," speak of repentance as being like oil and wine for a soul that is sick, and present the sin-

⁹ The same words are used in the baptismal rite; see *Service Book* (2002, 157) and the rite of anointing with oil; cf. Meyendorff (2009, 127).

¹⁰ This rite contains various prayers of exorcism, including: "O Lord Sabaoth, the God of Israel, who heals every malady and every infirmity: Look upon your servant; prove him/her and search him/her; and root out every operation of the Devil" (147). As one might imagine, similar themes run throughout the rite of the anointing of the sick; cf. Meyendorff (2009), especially p. 123.

disorder as a type of wound or injury: "Bind up, O Jesus, the wounds of my soul, as the Samaritan bound up the wounds of him that fell among thieves, and heal me from my pain, I pray O Christ."¹¹

The liturgical texts, then, repeatedly associate the sin-disorder with sickness and associate deliverance from the disorder with health.¹² In traditions in which participating in the Eucharist and the practice of fasting are still alive, such as the Eastern tradition, these associations would be natural, especially in the context of the Eucharistic prayers. For it is common in these traditions to understand the state of disorder from which human beings suffer in terms of a narrative in which food figures prominently. The falling away of human beings is presented as a matter of disordered eating, the refusal to fast, hungering for something other than God. Redemption, in turn, is achieved (in part) by "ordered eating," in which followers of Christ participate in the Eucharist. It is no accident, then, that the Eucharistic prayers are replete with imagery of sin, health, and food. For, according to the church's salvation narrative, it is by food we fall and by food that we're redeemed.

The associations that one finds in the liturgy between the sin-disorder, health, and food, I believe, are rich and suggestive, so let me continue to explore them, as I believe they can help to shed light on our original question of how participation in liturgical rites could be for the remission of sin. When the tradition has addressed the issue of disordered eating, it has typically done so by associating it with gluttony, which is often understood in the Eastern tradition as one of the "passions" and in the Western tradition as a deadly vice.¹³ In the first chapter of his book *For the Life of the World*, the Orthodox theologian Alexander Schmemmann also explores the connections between food and deliverance from sin, but approaches the discussion from a different direction. Schmemmann writes that the scriptures begin with a portrayal of the human being "as a hungry being, with the man who is that which he eats. ... In the Bible the good that man eats, the world of which he must partake in order to live, is given to him by God, and it is given as *communion with God*" (1973, 14). Continuing this thought, Schmemmann says that "the 'original' sin is not primarily that man has 'disobeyed' God; the sin is that he ceased to be hungry for Him and for Him alone, ceased to see his whole life depending on the whole world as a sacrament of communion with God" (Ibid., 18). In these passages, Schmemmann suggests that while the falling away is the manifestation of an eating disorder, the disorder is not so much a manifestation of gluttony as a failure to hunger—specifically, a failure to hunger for God.¹⁴

¹¹ Mary and Ware (2002, 360, 180, 408, 691). Cf. also pp. 399 and 480.

¹² As do prominent figures in the tradition. To pick just one example, St. Cyril of Alexandria writes: "After Adam fell by sin and sank into corruption ... nature became sick with sin... Human nature in Adam became sick through the corruption of disobedience." Quoted in Hierotheos (2005, 37). In his homilies, John Chrysostomos airs similar themes, describing the church as a hospital. The word, says Chrysostomos, is like medicine to the soul. Hierotheos (1996) addresses the theme of sin as sickness.

¹³ See, for example, Staniloe (2002), Pt. I.

¹⁴ The contrast with Milton, for example, is striking. In *Paradise Lost*, Milton describes the Fall as the manifestation of gluttony.

The liturgical texts make bold and puzzling claims about the link between participating in liturgical rites and being released from the grip of the sin-disorder. What we're looking for is a way of understanding this disorder that sheds light on how it could be that we are delivered from its grip, as the liturgical texts claim, by participating in liturgical activities such as eating. Moreover, we are looking for a way of understanding these rites so that they could plausibly be understood to contribute to our deliverance even when those who eat, are baptized, or are anointed fail to understand their significance. Although Schmemmann himself never developed the idea, there is, I believe, a way of understanding the disorder in question that might help us to answer our questions. And that is to take seriously the idea that the sin-disorder is akin to disordered eating in which we fail to hunger. The approach I want to explore, then, is one that flips on its head the traditional understanding between food and the sin-disorder. Rather than view the sin-disorder as manifested in the indulgence of appetite, view it instead as manifested in a lack of appetite.

A theme that repeatedly surfaces in Harriet Brown's riveting book *Brave Girl Eating*, which chronicles her daughter's struggle with anorexia, is that most of us operate with deep misunderstandings about disordered eating. It is commonly assumed that those who suffer from such a disorder choose, for various reasons, to suffer from them. Brown provides a powerful corrective to these misunderstandings. Those who suffer from disorders such as anorexia do not choose them; rather, these disorders choose them (Brown 2010, 4). Moreover, these disorders seem to be no respecter of persons; while those who suffer from anorexia in particular are often highly intelligent, curious, and perceptive, these qualities do not insulate them from the disorder. Those in its grip—and that is exactly how Brown describes anorexia, a power that grips¹⁵—suffer from a baffling confluence of self-destructive behavior, loss of personal autonomy, and ruthless self-loathing, laced with the tendencies to isolate oneself from others, engage in deceptive behavior, and radically misperceive one's own state. In one place, Brown quotes a therapist who describes the condition as a kind of "encapsulated psychosis": someone with anorexia suffers from a set of delusions just as powerful as those of the schizophrenic, but only with respect to food, eating, and body image (Ibid., 52-53).¹⁶

To illustrate the power of this disorder, Brown cites a researcher who describes a case in which he invited two anorexic women to his class and asked one of them to describe how much she weighed and how she looked. The woman said that she weighed seventy pounds and looked fat. When asked to describe her companion, she said that the other woman looked terrible, as if she were going to die. When the researcher pointed out that both women were the same weight and

¹⁵ Although Brown describes herself as not religious, she often refers to the condition from which her daughter suffered as a power, indeed, a "demon" (64). She even documents one case in which her daughter, who was in a trance-like state at the nadir of her condition, spoke with an unrecognizable voice while her tongue flicked like "a snake's forked tongue" (Ibid.).

¹⁶ Describing her daughter, Brown writes: "On the subjects of food and eating and fat, Kitty's delusional. Obviously. On every other subject, though, she's the same girl she's always been, sharp-witted, insightful, quick" (62).

height, the first woman had no answer as to why she perceived herself as fat and the other as emaciated (Ibid.). Apparently, suffering from the disorder is strongly correlated with not realizing that one suffers from the disorder or its effects. Distorted perception of this variety, as Brown herself stresses, has an important social component, for social feedback mechanisms, in countless and sometimes unintentional ways, reinforce it, presenting the bodies of anorexics as healthy, desirable, or attractive. In a passage intended to make readers wince, Brown describes a case in which a nurse inadvertently compliments her daughter for being so slim, even when her daughter's health is in grave danger (Ibid., 28).¹⁷

A moment ago I stated the obvious by describing eating disorders such as anorexia as being accompanied by self-destructive behavior. In truth, however, the tendency toward self-destruction among those who suffer from the condition is breathtaking. More people die from it than any other mental disorder, many from committing suicide. Only a third of those diagnosed recover from it. Particularly striking is that rational persuasion and therapy—on their own, at least—have almost no positive impact, despite the considerable intelligence of a large percentage of those who suffer from the disorder. In fact, on its own, therapy can be harmful. According to one expert whom Brown cites, what you end up with when you do intensive psychotherapy with someone with anorexia is "an insightful corpse," someone good at rationalizing but unable to alter her perception of food, eating, and the body (Ibid., 179). But if rational persuasion, therapy—and for that matter, pharmaceuticals—tend not to help, at least on their own, where does the road to recovery lie?

Anorexics typically feel no hunger—indeed, the Greek word "anorexia" simply means "loss of appetite"—and appear to experience less pleasure from eating than others (Ibid., 130). Still, the road to recovery lies in getting them to eat, the most effective environments for eating being ones in which they eat in community with those whom they trust, such as family. Reflecting on her daughter's case, Brown writes that it was not pharmaceuticals but food that acted as her daughter's "medicine," the cure for her "body and mind" (Ibid., 194-95).¹⁸ Still, Brown notes, the medicine works very slowly. Her daughter's recovery stretches out over months and years; there are no shortcuts. And, indeed, her daughter relapses, as many who suffer from the disorder do. (The relapse rate among anorexics is staggeringly high.)

The parallels between the disorder that Brown describes in her book and the Christian understanding of the sin-disorder are telling. In both cases, we find ourselves describing the disorders in active terms, as powers to whose influence we do not choose to submit ourselves, but in some sense find ourselves under. Their manifestations are, moreover, baffling, often unintelligible, even to those in its grip. ("I do not understand what I do. For what I want to do, I do not do, but what I hate I

¹⁷ During the course of her discussion, Brown cites Bynum (1987), which explores the ways in which the Christian tradition has failed to recognize anorexia as a disease, lauding it as the manifestation of the virtue of abstinence.

¹⁸ Elsewhere, Brown describes her methods for helping her daughter as "exposure therapy" in which she slowly desensitizes her daughter to the thing she fears most, namely, food (104).

do" [Romans 7:15].) Although their behavior is unintelligible in certain respects, those in the grip of these disorders are often highly intelligent; paradoxically, in the case of anorexia, the unintelligibility and the intelligence go hand in hand, although the latter often proves to be not particularly helpful in the recovery process. Moreover, the associations with death, self-destruction, self-condemnation, deceit, division, and misperception of oneself and others, which I only touched upon, are unmistakable. St. Paul's claim in Romans that death came into the world through sin (Romans 7:12) takes on a very different color when the latter is understood to be a disorder whose grip often drives us to self-destructive behavior.¹⁹ Finally, to hearken back to Schmemmann's observation, there is in both cases the failure to hunger. Taking Schmemmann's original observation into account, *both* disorders manifest themselves as a failure to hunger—baffling from the perspective of the healthy—for that which we need most to live.

I began this section with a question, asking: What is being presupposed about our human condition such that it is intelligible to hold that liturgical activities such as eating, baptizing, and anointing are for the remission of sin? I suggested that we understand the phrase "remission of sin" to mean *being released from the grip of sin*, where the latter is understood to be a disorder of the self with multiple dimensions, including broadly therapeutic ones. To help us understand the character of this disorder, I worked with Schmemmann's observation that it manifests itself as a failure to hunger, a condition that strikingly parallels the disordered eating that Brown describes in her book.

What most interests me, however, is not simply the ways in which these disorders are similar but also the ways in which they are addressed. In the case of Brown's daughter, recovery did not consist primarily in persuasion, therapy, argument, or the like. In fact, such efforts were typically futile and, at a certain stage, potentially counterproductive. Rather, recovery lay in the realm of the sub-doxastic, with eating; other modalities, such as therapy, which proved to be important, could take effect only when Brown's daughter had been "re-fed." The suggestion I wish to make is *not* that liturgical activities such as partaking of Eucharist, being baptized, or being anointed with oil are, to the person in the grip of the sin-disorder, as ingesting a sufficient amount of calories is to the person with an eating disorder—at least not in the sense that there are some identifiable mechanisms for recovery that we could identify in each case. Rather, the line I wish to pursue is that deeply embedded in the liturgy is the conviction that deliverance from the grip of the disorder that afflicts us does not come exclusively—and perhaps not even primarily—through persuasion, argument, or hearing. Rather, deliverance comes in the form of participating in activities that operate on us on a sub-doxastic level.

Stated more broadly, the idea is that important elements that contribute to the loosening of the grip of the disorder do not consist in the presentation or acceptance of propositions about God or God's activity or experiences that aim to evoke beliefs about God or God's activity. The presupposition of the liturgy seems to be, instead, that there are important elements that contribute to the loosening of the grip of the sin-disorder which operate—at least in large measure—at a sub-doxastic

¹⁹ I realize that there is controversy regarding the correct translation of this passage from Romans.

level, below the level of understanding or belief. To the extent that it occurs, the presupposition seems to be that release from the disorder comes through doing bodily things in communion with others, such as eating, being baptized, and being anointed. Moreover, it may be that, for many, the temporal directionality of the process of being released parallels that described by Brown. First, one must do bodily things such as eat; only afterward are there shifts in perception, the ability to recognize one's illness and its effects, to hear what one could not previously understand, and so forth. At the very least, the conviction of the church seems to be that engaging in these liturgical activities must occur in tandem with actions that we would naturally identify as redemptive, such as praying or engaging with the texts of the Gospels.

I do not find it easy to articulate or understand this presupposition about the role of bodily actions that seems to be built into the liturgy. Most of us who identify with the Christian tradition are unaccustomed to thinking of that which contributes to the relaxation of the grip of the sin-disorder as bodily action that often operates, over time and gradually, on the sub-doxastic level, below the level of understanding or belief. We are much more accustomed to thinking about the cognitive dimensions of the sin-disorder and about the contributions that cognitive states, such as changes in beliefs and intentions, make to the loosening of the disorder's grip. Indeed, the liturgical life of huge swaths of Christians seems to be built on such "cognitivist" suppositions. However that may be, what we were looking for is an analogue—a model—of a deep disorder of the self whose grip is relaxed not, in the first instance at least, at the level of changing the beliefs or views of the person who is in the grip of the disorder, but in some other way, through bodily actions such as eating. And we have done that, even if we have little understanding at this point of how the relaxation of the grip occurs in the case of the sin-disorder. The thought is simply that, with the example of disordered eating and its treatment before us, we can point to them, noting that the sin-disorder and its treatment seem to be importantly like *that*.

II. Models of rites

When one consults the liturgical texts, a certain model of how the Mysteries or sacraments operate seems to emerge. Take, to begin with, texts from the rite of baptism in which the celebrant prays:

That this water may be sanctified with the power, and effectual operation, and indwelling of the Holy Spirit, let us pray to the Lord. ...

That there may come upon this water the purifying operation of the super-substantial Trinity, let us pray to the Lord (*Service Book* 2002, 152).

In the same rite (as well as the rite of anointing the sick), similar things are asked of the oil with which the baptized is to be anointed:

Bless also this holy oil with the power, and operation, and indwelling of your Holy Spirit (Ibid., 129).²⁰

And in considerably more poetic language, one of the post-communion prayers runs:

O You who willingly does give your flesh to me as food, You who are a fire, consuming the unworthy. ... Pass through all my body parts ... burn the thorns of all my transgressions (Ibid.).

Under a fairly natural reading, these texts seem to express two related ideas: first, that in the rites of baptism, anointing, and Eucharist, ordinary physical elements are endowed with new powers—powers to contribute to the remission of sin, among other things. And, second, that it is by coming into physical contact with these physical elements that we benefit from these powers.

For ease of reference, call this way of thinking of the Mysteries or sacraments the *contact model*.²¹ Given a certain understanding of the Christian tradition, it is easy to see how the view might be attractive. It takes the role of matter very seriously, viewing it as a point of contact with the divine. It is, moreover, consistent with the traditional claim that the Eucharistic elements are the body and blood of Christ. Finally, the model is well-situated to make good on the claim that liturgical activities can contribute to the remission of sin on a sub-doxastic level, as we could be entirely unaware of the powers of the water, the oil, or the bread and wine that operate on us.

That said, it is difficult to shake the impression—or, at least, I find it difficult to shake the impression—that this model traffics in magic. I make this observation not because I think it expresses a decisive objection to the contact model; perhaps there are ways to understand the model so that it looks much less as it were describing something occult in which ordinary material stuff is endowed with supernatural powers. But I do think that the model is worrisome enough to encourage us to look for other models of how liturgical rites could contribute to the remission of sin. Are there any?

I believe so. In what remains, I would like to sketch an alternative model that captures what is attractive in the contact model, not—let me emphasize—for the purpose of developing it in the detail that it deserves, but rather to try to make

²⁰ And elsewhere: "we beg you, O our God, to direct your mercy upon this oil, and upon all who shall be anointed with it in your Name, that it may be for the healing of their souls and bodies, for purification, and for the removal of every passion, every disease and infirmity, and every defilement of body and spirit" (148); cf. p. 152. Other translations, it is worth noting, run: "Bless also this holy oil *through* the power, and operation and indwelling of your Holy Spirit" rather than "with the power."

²¹ This is, arguably, the model with which the Council of Trent operated and which was attacked by Reformers, such as Calvin. As will become evident shortly, while I believe one can read the passages I have quoted as presupposing something like the contact model, I do not think that this is the best reading.

better sense of how liturgical rites could contribute to the remission of sin, when this is understood along the lines proposed earlier.

Like the contact model, the model I wish to develop has two primary components. The best way to present the first component is to remind ourselves that the Eastern tradition has tended not to think of the Mysteries or sacraments as "visible signs of an invisible grace," as the Western tradition has. Rather, the Eastern tradition has tended to think of the Mysteries as points of contact, means of communion with God. Schmemmann articulates this understanding when he says that a sacrament is "a revelation of the genuine *nature* of creation" (Schmemmann 1987, 33). As such, a "sacrament ... is always a *passage*, a *transformation*" (Schmemmann 1973, 102). "Yet," Schmemmann continues,

it is not a "passage" into "supernature," but into the Kingdom of God, the world to come, into the very reality of this world and its life as redeemed and restored by Christ. It is the transformation not of "nature" into "supernature," but of the *old* into the *new*. A sacrament therefore is not a "miracle" by which God breaks, so to speak, the "laws of nature," but the manifestation of the ultimate Truth about the world and life (Ibid.).²²

According to this way of seeing things, in rites such as baptism, Eucharist, and anointing, matter is indeed changed. But the change is not that of endowing material stuff with supernatural powers, as the contact model would have it. Rather, the change is one of *function*. The new function is one in which matter becomes a means of communion with God. Schmemmann puts this last point in various ways. Echoing the passage cited above, he writes that "Christ came ... to restore ... matter ...and to fulfill it as the means of communion with God," which is its "original function" (Schmemmann 1974, 49, 42). And again: "such is the meaning of the baptismal blessing of water. It is the re-creation of matter, and thus of the world, in Christ. ... It is the gift of the world as communion with God" (Ibid., 51).

In a moment, I will have something more to say about what it would be for something to be a means of communion with God. In the meanwhile, the point to stress, is that under this model, liturgical activities such as baptizing, Eucharist, and anointing incorporate a *normative* understanding of matter, an understanding not so much of what it is as what it is supposed to be, how it is supposed to function in our life together. As Schmemmann himself indicates, this understanding of the liturgical rites in question and the role of matter look both backward and forward. They look backward insofar as, according to the Christian narrative, the original

²² Schmemmann continues: "Thus, for example, to bless water, making it 'holy water,' may have two entirely different meanings. It may mean, on the one hand, the transformation of something *profane*, and thus religiously void or neutral, into something *sacred*, in which the main religious meaning of 'holy water' is precisely that it is no longer 'mere' water, and it is in fact opposed to it—as the sacred is to the profane. Here the act of blessing reveals nothing about water, and thus about matter or world, but on the contrary makes them irrelevant to the new function of water as 'holy water' ... 'sacramentality' has been replaced everywhere by 'sacrality,' epiphany' by an almost magical incrustation into time and matter (the 'natural'), by the 'supernatural'" (132). Cf. Schmemmann (1987, 61).

calling of human beings was to transform the world, including its material stuff, by transforming it into a means of communion with God. There is a sense, then, in which in the liturgical rites incorporate not simply a normative understanding of matter but also of human beings, inasmuch as by engaging in these rites, human beings return to their intended calling or vocation as the ones who are to transform the world—as Schmemmann sometimes writes, the vocation of being the priest, offering back to God in thanks that which was given for our use (Schmemmann 1973, ch. 1; 100). These rites also look forward, however, having an unmistakable eschatological dimension. They anticipate—hence, Schmemmann's use of the imagery of entering into the "kingdom"—and to some extent realize, what God is working toward, which is the restoration of creation.²³

Liturgical rites of certain kinds, I have suggested, are helpfully understood as actions in which elements of matter acquire a normative function. While material things can acquire functions in various ways—we can, for example, construct or design artifacts in certain ways—often they do so by our *imposing* these functions on them: by treating pieces of paper in certain ways, we impose on it the function of being a dollar bill; by treating the rock on my desk in certain ways, I impose on it the function of being a paperweight, and so on.²⁴

According to the first part of the model that I wish to develop, something similar is true of liturgical activities such as baptizing, eating the Eucharist, and anointing; they, too, are activities in which we impose normative functions on matter. For when the assembled engage in activities such as baptizing, eating the Eucharist, and anointing, they treat material things as points of communion with God; their following the liturgical script guarantees that they treat them in this way. If the model is correct, these scripted activities thereby impose a new function on these things: in virtue of treating these elements as points of contact, means of communion with God, they thereby become points of contact, means of communion with God. To be sure, these liturgical activities are also attempts on the church's part to fulfill commandments, issued by Jesus or by his followers, to baptize, to eat together in remembrance, and to anoint the sick. But that is not in tension with the model we're considering. For if what I am saying is correct, these injunctions would be directives to impose normative functions on ordinary things such as bread, water, wine, and oil.

The first commitment of the model I am proposing, then, is to understanding certain liturgical rites as ones that involve the imposition of normative functions. In this respect, I've suggested, these rites are similar to activities in which we impose monetary value on pieces of paper or metal. So, without too much distortion we can say that it is a social fact that elements such as bread, water, wine, and oil have the function of being a means of communion with God. That said, there is a crucial difference between the two cases. In the case of ordinary social facts, we can (all else being equal) impose a function on a piece of paper simply by treating it in a certain way. In the liturgical case, it is not this simple. For deep in the church is the

²³ The "kingdom of God," Schmemmann writes, "is the content of the Christian faith ... unity with God, the source of life" (1987, 40-41).

²⁴ The most developed account of this phenomenon of which I'm aware is Searle (1995).

conviction that if bread, water, wine, and oil are to become points of contact with God—means for liberation from the disorder that afflicts us—this is not simply up to us. God's activity is crucial.

The second commitment of the model that I am developing is to the claim that the normative function that is imposed on matter by way of liturgical activity is determined not simply by human but also by divine activity; that matter has such a function is a human-divine social fact, the result of a human-divine cooperative endeavor. In fact, I would say that the cooperative endeavor is a case of collective agency in which both God and the assembly share certain "we intentions" that have as their content the performance of certain joint activities—in this case, the activity of treating various material elements as points of contact with God.²⁵ In various places, Nicholas Wolterstorff has proposed that we can helpfully think of this sort of cooperation by employing the concept of *double-agency action*.²⁶

Take a case in which I perform some action, such as promising to care for your children should you happen not to be able to care for them. Suppose the context determines that in promising this I speak for my entire family. In this case, not only have I promised you something but so also have the other members of my family. By one person doing something (in this case, promising) another person does something (in this case, an action of the same sort). In double-agency action, then, one agent acts by the actions of another such that the actions of the one count as actions of the other. In the case of liturgical rites, the thought is, when the assembled treat elements such as bread, water, wine, and oil as means of communion with God by following the liturgical script, God also treats these elements as means of communion, for God intends to act and acts by the actions of the assembled. Viewed from this angle, liturgical rites of this sort would be a paradigmatic case of human-divine cooperative action in which human beings and God together impose normative functions on matter. Under this understanding, liturgical activity is genuinely creative action; it involves the creation of human-divine social facts.²⁷

In the context of our discussion, this point strikes me as important for the following reason. Our overarching concern has been to determine in what sense liturgical activities, such as engaging in the Eucharist, baptizing, and anointing, could be for the remission of sin—where this last phrase means *being released from the grip of the sin-disorder*. When one consults the liturgical texts themselves, however, it can seem as if they operate with the contact model: in the context of the liturgy, God endows material elements with powers which are such that, when a person

²⁵ Cuneo (2010) develops this theme.

²⁶ Most prominently in his (1995), Ch. 3.

²⁷ Richard Swinburne has called to my attention the similarities between this model and that developed by Dummett (1987). The primary difference between our views are these: first, Dummett wishes to offer a model for understanding how the Eucharistic elements could truly be said to be the body and blood of Christ, whereas the model I develop endeavors to throw light on the nature of the Mysteries more generally. Second, Dummett maintains that divine action is implicated in the imposition of a new status on the Eucharistic elements insofar as God has granted some agent the relevant authority to declare the Eucharistic elements the body and blood of Christ. My view is consistent with but does not require this approach.

comes into physical contact with these elements, they contribute to the loosening of the grip of the sin-disorder of that person. Given the almost occult features of the contact model, it would be good to have an alternative, one that helps us see how liturgical activity might contribute to the remission of sin. There is, I have suggested, an attractive alternative according to which certain liturgical rites impose on material stuff the normative function of being means of communion with God. And, although I haven't emphasized the point, this model seems to be consistent with the liturgical texts, sharing whatever virtues the contact model may have, such as being compatible with various understandings of the Eucharist elements as the body of Christ. The issue that remains to be explored is the way in which this model might account for how liturgical activities could contribute to the remission of sin, understood in the way suggested earlier.

Although I find myself with less to say about this matter than I'd like, let me make a few initial observations. In the first place, it would be a mistake, I believe, to attempt to identify a one-size-fits-all way in which liturgical activity contributes to the loosening of the sin-disorder; the disorder has multiple dimensions and, in principle, participating in liturgical rites could address its various dimensions and in various ways. Second, while the church has understood liturgical activity as a locus of divine action, it has not maintained that activities such as participating in the Eucharist—to pick one example—are sufficient for the remission of sin. The best way to understand the liturgical script, I believe, is that, when all goes well, these activities contribute over time to the release of the grip of the sin-disorder—presumably in concert with other activities such as prayer and almsgiving. And, finally, it would, I think, be a mistake to think that the primary way in which these liturgical activities function as a point of contact with God is by evoking mystical experiences or beliefs about God's activity. A central task of the Christian life is, after all, to alter not so much our beliefs but our perception of—our "take" on—our environment, viewing it through eyes that see the extraordinary in the ordinary.

These points noted, let me call attention to the locution "means of communion" that I've borrowed from Schmemmann to describe both liturgical rites themselves and the material stuff with which they work. The phrase is fecund. When thinking about human relationships, the means in question seem almost limitless: a spoken word, a letter, play, work, or an embrace can all be means of communion, ways of bonding. Moreover, the bonding between persons that occurs can range from coming to see something as someone else does, coming to appreciate something that someone else does, or learning to love something someone else does, on the one hand, to enjoying a sub-doxastic connection with another, such as that difficult-to-describe connection that parents share with their infants, or owners, with their pets, on the other. When it comes to speaking of something as being a means of communion with God, the best we can do is to start with these phenomena and extend our understanding of them analogically to God. We can speak, then, of an activity that contributes to our appreciating what God appreciates or of sensing the goodness of the Holy One, an experience that is no easier to describe than the experience of bonding that occurs between a parent and a child.

Suppose, then, we work with this fairly open-ended understanding of what it would mean for something to be a means of communion—a point of contact—with

God. The next point to make is that to the extent that some activity is a means of communion with God—a way of bonding or joining together—it is thereby the sort of thing that can contribute to the loosening of the sin-disorder. The dynamic is familiar: union with one thing contributes to the release from another. Joining one alliance means releasing oneself from the other. If this is right, there is no need to think of liturgical rites or matter as having some special function of loosening the grip of the sin-disorder. They accomplish this simply by bringing us into communion with God in one or another way—this communion being the upshot, in part, of our treating certain acts and objects as points of contact with God. The point that I have been eager to press is that this communion is not exhausted by cognition. It has important—if difficult to understand—sub-doxastic dimensions, similar perhaps to that effected by the touch of another human being.

III. Conclusion

Not long ago, I listened to a radio program in which the respected poet Christian Wiman spoke of the role of poetry during a time in which he was suffering from an extremely rare form of cancer and was near death. Wiman found that the experience re-kindled a faith that he had abandoned decades earlier. In a state that he describes as one in which he could feel death "sniffing" him over, he found abstract poetry and descriptions of God empty, even "poisonous." Only poetry full of concrete images and descriptions, such as the vivid description of peeling a grapefruit, resonated with him.

Wiman's experience isn't universal; some find comfort in abstractions. It should be conceded, moreover, that the liturgical script is full of fairly abstract depictions of God. Still, what Wiman's experience points to is the power and importance that the particular can have. And, in the liturgy, the particular abounds. For the liturgy is not a series of propositions or a philosophical meditation on God's greatness. It is rather a sequence of actions composed of particular bodily rites—rites such as baptizing, participating in the Eucharist, and anointing—that engage with material stuff. Even when we are children, these rites often shape our sensibilities without our realizing it, helping us to associate God and God's activity with the concrete, the particular, the material, the communal. This is not a capitulation to our failures of imagination; on the contrary, it is a testament to divine immanence, to the "One who fills all things." And to the extent that these rites do this—so the assumption of the tradition seems to be—these actions could be the sort of thing that brings us into communion with God in ways that are difficult to articulate and that we sometimes do not understand.²⁸

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