

GHISLAIN LAFONT AND CONTEMPORARY SACRAMENTAL THEOLOGY

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[The author demonstrates how Ghislain Lafont looks “through” the critiques of meta-narrative and onto-theology for an appropriate ground for theology. Lafont appeals to sacramental memorial as the starting point for a response to postmodern critiques, a response that is shown to be both balanced and faithful. When presented in relation to the works of two of his contemporaries, Louis-Marie Chauvet and David N. Power, Lafont’s sacramental theology can be appreciated for its hopeful vision and practical contribution to a contemporary understanding of sacrament and ritual action.]

MY PURPOSE HERE is to present a brief, critical appraisal of Ghislain Lafont’s writings as they relate to contemporary discussions of sacramental theology.¹ Since his contribution to sacramental theology derives from his response to postmodern questions, this will be done in light of the writings offered by two other contemporary sacramental theologians, Louis-Marie Chauvet² and David N. Power,³ who are also concerned with similar issues. Chauvet’s writings offer an alternative to Lafont’s methodology in its comprehensive effort at a fundamental sacramental theology based on a contemporary formulation of symbolic exchange, and are also

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¹ Ghislain Lafont, *Dieu, le temps et l’être* (Paris: Cerf, 1986), translated as *God, Time, and Being*, trans. Leonard Maluf (Petersham, Mass: Saint Bede’s, 1992). Lafont is a French Benedictine monk, born in 1928, whose contribution to sacramental theology derives from his desire to retain ontological discourse in theology in the face of the problems derived from the Heideggerian critique. To accomplish this goal, Lafont links narrativity and the analogy of being; he finds the ground for their conjunction in the references to eucharistic discourse to time, being, and transcendence.

² Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbole et sacrement: Une relecture sacramentelle de l’existence chrétienne* (Paris: Cerf, 1987), translated as *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1995).

³ David N. Power, *Sacrament: The Language of God’s Giving* (New York: Crossroad, 1999).

considered a fundamental response to postmodern issues. Power's writings, which stay within the limits of sacramental discourse, provide a more in-depth look at the issues of hermeneutics and how hermeneutical issues impact the articulation of sacrament as memorial. By highlighting specific themes and concepts in the writings of these three theologians, Lafont's contribution to sacramental theology can better be appreciated.

My study offers a confirmation of the points found in Lafont's theology, points that need to be raised about sacrament when placed in the context of certain postmodern critiques. I also offer some critical comments on his writings. Key to demonstrating Lafont's development of these points is an awareness of where Lafont stands in relation to two of his contemporaries. A point-by-point comparison of these three authors is not feasible within the scope of this article. However, there are basic points that form the central part of Lafont's contribution to sacramental theology that are worth exploring in relation to the writings of these two other theologians. The three primary topics for consideration are: (1) sacrament in a postmodern context; (2) methodological differences that arise in response to the writings of Martin Heidegger; and (3) an overall assessment of Lafont's contribution to sacramental theology in light of the writings of Chauvet and Power.

SACRAMENT IN A POSTMODERN CONTEXT

Lafont's writings are marked by his frustration with the parameters set by many postmodern critiques. He sees most postmodern critiques as stemming from a desire to abandon the questions of presence, signification, and any concept of Being in order to move on to other paths. He shares an alternate vision with Chauvet, who also offers a common appeal to sacramental memorial as a starting point for a response to these postmodern critiques.

Of particular interest is the way Lafont presents his appeal to sacramental memorial as the starting point for a response to postmodern critiques. On this account, Lafont gives a very privileged place to narrative, especially Christianity's founding *récit*.⁴ Lafont believes that the most basic and elemental way of addressing or speaking about God, time, and Being comes from the biblical narrative and the oral-aural (spoken-heard) interplay of the *récit*.

For Lafont, the *récit* represents a tradition in which the telling of and listening to stories are a mutually creative, interactive language-event that shares a special relation to the written texts of the scriptural canon. La-

⁴ Lafont's use of the word *récit* is retained throughout my text instead of its translation to "narrative." This retention serves to highlight the importance that Lafont gives to the oral tradition of narrativity.

font's theology describes a process of bonding that takes place in the *récit* under the category of witness. He gives an example of the importance of this bond in his description of the apostolic witness given to the Resurrection. He writes: "Actually, the notion of witness implies that the apostles received and heard the announcement of a Resurrection at once factual and meaningful. In all respects, they are included in their testimony; they do not control it in any way and they are the first to be founded by the founding narrative for which they hold the responsibility for all men."⁵

According to Lafont, those listening to the proclamation of the word in *récit* are intimately bound to each other and to the event proclaimed. When this bond is recorded as a written text, it is then handed on in the proclamation of the sacramental memorial and interpreted for the assembled congregation. For Lafont, the importance of the sacramental memorial does not come from the narrative alone. It is inserted into ritual action, related to other types of scriptural text, and perfected in doxology. Thus, the appropriation of the narrative through forms of discourse, biblical and eucharistic, shapes our relationships within belief.

While Lafont gives a privileged place to *récit* within the sacramental memorial, he does not draw out the process whereby the content of the *récit* becomes significant beyond the particular event it narrates. He suggests that the *récit* allows us to discern the actual process of human, personal, and social existence, to appreciate properly sexuality and work, and to situate correctly the origin and influence of evil.⁶ Lafont also grants the paschal narrative/*récit* the ability to transcend the "homogenous narrativity of a natural or social history"⁷ but he does not give an adequate explanation of why or how this narrative does so. Though Lafont keeps the importance of the Scriptures as written texts, he emphasizes that it is through the *récit* of liturgical proclamation that God's Word and the embodied testimony comes alive and can be interpreted concretely in the life of a community. Beyond this he offers no further explanation of how this interpretation takes place across time.

On these accounts, Lafont gives inadequate attention to the hermeneutical process. An explanation of the function of the *récit* and of how it is interpreted in celebration and across time would be important because at the heart of the postmodern critique is the suspicion of the all-encompassing meta-narrative and its totalizing and exclusionary effects.

⁵ "En réalité, la notion de témoignage implique que les apôtres aient *reçu* et *écouté* l'annonce d'une résurrection à la fois factuelle et sensée. A tous égards, ils sont *inclus* dans leur témoignage; ils ne le dominent en aucune manière et ils sont les premiers à être fondés par le récit fondateur dont ils ont pour tous les hommes la responsabilité" (Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 138; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 148).

⁶ Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 107; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 126.

⁷ Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 154; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 165.

Lafont does not deal with these charges directly in his principle of narrativity. He merely affirms the transcendent nature of the *récit* and the possibility of a living interpretation and appropriation that is both faithful to the original witness and also able to overcome the distance of time. I take up this topic again later in showing how David Power gives more attention to the hermeneutical process.

Lafont's understanding of the place of the *récit* in sacramental memorial comes from the power of the *récit* and its ongoing relationship to the word, a power that is derived from the language-event itself. With this argument, Lafont fashions a privileged place for narrative in the sacramental memorial while aiming to avoid the critiques associated with the "meta-narrative." The way Lafont is able to accomplish this task is with some understanding and appeal to the analogy of faith and the analogy of being.

Lafont is not alone in his appeal to an analogy of faith to bolster his understanding of narrativity and a philosophy of Being. While Chauvet makes an attempt to adapt the Heideggerian critique into an articulation of symbolic exchange, his methodology ultimately returns to a reliance on the language of faith in the interpretive process. A look at Chauvet's approach to narrativity and his approach to the writings of Martin Heidegger will help to contextualize Lafont's response to these issues. Putting Lafont's theology alongside Chauvet's writings show how Lafont's appeal to the analogy of faith in narrativity differs from Chauvet's critique and explanation of the functioning of language and his efforts to overcome onto-theology.

Louis-Marie Chauvet's Approach to Narrativity

Chauvet addresses the issue of a founding narrative's transcendent quality in his book *Symbole et Sacrement*. He relates the function of narrativity to his broader consideration of "the act of symbolization."⁸ That is, he locates narrativity within a performance dimension of the act of symbolization. For Chauvet, this performance dimension of the act of symbolization is precisely what is done in the liturgical celebration. This means that Chauvet, like Lafont, views discourse as something extending beyond a text, where the power of the oral recitation comes from its mediating quality, a mediation expressed in identity and imagination.

Chauvet describes the dualism between the voice (orality) and the text (literature) as one that has historically been a relationship of resistance, a resistance based on a denial of mediation. However, Chauvet hopes to reconcile this relationship in his understanding of the mediating quality of sacramental memorial. He understands the importance of narrativity as stemming from a recognition and embrace of humankind's activity as me-

⁸ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 128; *Symbole et sacrement* 135.

diators of language and symbol. According to Chauvet, we are called to embrace the reality that "the most 'spiritual' happens through the most 'corporeal' " thereby enjoining the narrative and the body as embodiments of speech.⁹ What this means is that Chauvet relates the mediation of language with the mediation of bodily ritual, the personal body and the body of the Church.

Chauvet's writings are more exhaustive than Lafont's in showing how the formation of the scriptural canon had a foundation in liturgical recitation. He sees this formation stemming back to the Old Testament, particularly in the great founding events of Israel. Chauvet is able to show with this how the memorial of an event is given importance in liturgical memorial, particularly the way in which a past event is continually memorialized in the present, and how this memorial is then the ground for retaining the narrative as text. Because Chauvet addresses how the memorial relates to an originating event and how the liturgy embodies these events, he is better able to circumvent the postmodern critiques of the meta-narrative and to clarify better how faith is integral to the interpretive process.

The difference in Chauvet and Lafont's approach to narrative within sacramental memorial is basically a difference of degree. Lafont gives far more emphasis to the necessity of faith in establishing a criterion in language whereas Chauvet looks to an articulation of the symbolic to allow for validation within language, a validation that is without domination or certainty. Chauvet gives more attention than does Lafont to the philosophies of hermeneutics, the role of Church as witness, the function of the liturgy, with rite and symbol, and the possibility of an alternate to ontology, namely me-ontology.¹⁰

In his articulation of the symbolic, Chauvet differs more significantly from Lafont in his use of the category of metaphor. Chauvet prefers metaphor to analogy because it allows for a representation of the reality of an event, while also allowing the true nature to remain concealed. When focusing on the Church as witness to the Word/event, Chauvet shows that it is necessary for the Church to keep memorial, and that this memorial depends on a metaphoric sense of word in sacrament. An appeal to the metaphoric sense of word in sacrament allows Chauvet to avoid calculative

⁹ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 146; *Symbole et sacrement* 153.

¹⁰ See Stanislas Breton, *Écriture et révélation* (Paris: Desclée, 1978), *Le Verbe et la croix* (Paris: Desclée, 1981), and *Unicité et monothéisme* (Paris: Desclée, 1983). Me-ontology is a philosophy derived from the French philosopher Stanislas Breton. Breton's three books aim at developing a theology of revelation that emerges from his research into the neo-Platonist philosophy of Plotinus and the metaphysics of Thomas Aquinas. Of primary concern is correlation between *esse in* and *esse ad*, which together Breton believes can move postmodernity through onto-theology to his proposed me-ontology.

thinking and to ensure that the symbol conveys a sense of reality and gratuity.

Likewise, in speaking of God, Chauvet turns to the metaphor of the "Other." He grapples with what revelation is and how it relates to this "other order." Chauvet turns to the link between action, witness, and hermeneutics to explore the role of theology and the most appropriate discourse/name for God. From this link, Chauvet appeals to me-ontology¹¹ in developing the idea that theology is a discourse that witnesses to the "Other," the "One" we come to know through traces in memorial, witness, and narration.

In this approach, Chauvet remains tied to the possibility of theology and philosophy being homologous, an approach that Lafont abandons in his recourse to the analogy of faith. While Chauvet does treat narrative as foundational and locates it within the sacramental celebration, he uses the metaphor of the *Other* in describing God and the world's relation to God. This use of the metaphor of the *Other* creates a sense of "distance" between the celebrating assembly and the God who events throughout history.

Lafont's understanding of sacramental memorial avoids this sense of distance between God and humankind. His understanding of sacramental memorial emerges in the discussion of the sacrifice of communion and the genuine hope that is offered there. That is, for Lafont, the analogy of faith is the origin for the relationship offered in the sacrifice of communion.¹² Lafont's analysis of narrativity and the forms of sacramental celebration reveal his belief that humankind is made for communion with each other and with God. Thus, while Lafont's treatment of postmodern concerns are not as thorough as Chauvet's on many points, Lafont's vision offers to humankind a hope that is to be found in the contours of narrativity and the accompanying forms of the sacramental celebration.

The differences between Lafont and Chauvet can be seen more clearly in their response to the writings of Martin Heidegger. The differences in Lafont and Chauvet's response to Heidegger are important inasmuch as

¹¹ Chauvet writes of me-ontology: "The me-ontology indicated here is not of the same order as negative onto(theo)logy but of the order of *symbolism*: it is in disfiguring Jesus to the point of removing from him all otherness, in reducing him to a non-face, a non-subject, an 'object' of derision. . ." (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 74–75; *Symbole et sacrement* 78–79).

¹² Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 206; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 217–18. Lafont links humankind's engagement with biblical and eucharistic symbols and images to what he calls "a sacrifice of communion with God." That is, in spite of all the ambiguities of life and experience, humankind's desire for ritual and symbolism can be directed toward a "sacrifice" for communion with God, where symbols nourish thought and the mind is opened to relationship and the possibility of "other," going beyond the simple satisfaction of desire.

they affect how the principles of narrativity, analogy, and causality are used in sacramental theology. These three principles in turn affect the way in which discourse about ritual action and relationship with God may be construed. I aim to show that Lafont's response to these three issues makes a practical contribution to the possibility of a sacramental theology in a postmodern context.

RESPONSE TO THE WRITINGS OF MARTIN HEIDEGGER

Both Lafont and Chauvet take account of the philosophy of Martin Heidegger in order to fashion their response to the problems posed by postmodernity. A consideration of the differences in their response to Heidegger will show why Lafont's response to the issues that Heidegger raises is preferable for a consideration of sacrament in a postmodern context.

Chauvet is more exhaustive in his use of Heidegger's philosophy, considering Heidegger's philosophy as key to the "overcoming" of metaphysics. Chauvet thinks that to overcome onto-theology one must lay aside metaphysics and begin with the construction of a "new way" or a new terrain. For Chauvet, this new terrain begins with purging language of the metaphysical logos and rethinking Being as neither God nor a foundation for the world. Lafont, however, views Heidegger's philosophy with some measure of skepticism. Lafont accepts Heidegger's critique of onto-theology but argues that the problem may be resolved by metaphysics itself, if the analogy of being is used properly and put in the context of gift or donation.

Both Chauvet and Lafont approach Heidegger's philosophy armed with questions about the nature of language. For Chauvet, the task of overcoming onto-theology is first achieved by attending to the barrier of language, specifically the charge that it is impossible to conceive of a language not permeated by the Greek logos. Chauvet makes himself comfortable with the paradox of Being—that Being is more distant and yet closer to humans than any entity. He applies this paradox to the use of language to realize that humanity and language are inseparable. Only in letting ourselves be spoken can we be attentive to the call of Being. This is not done with words, according to Chauvet, but with silence.

Lafont calls for an understanding of Being that is not static and timeless, nor one that encapsulates God as one being among beings. He is careful to keep the Thomistic distinction between *Being in common* and the application of the term *Supreme Being* to God, so that God is not to be confused with Heidegger's talk of the advent of Being. Lafont sees the understanding of *Being in common* and of *God as Supreme Being*, and the relation of particular being to both, as correlative to a review of the question of history and to a reevaluation of the relationship between nature and culture.

Indeed, he insists that the question of God cannot be raised without due attention to the reality and historicity of particular beings. For Lafont, this reevaluation is necessary because any explanation of redemption must give priority to God's intervention in history and so needs a founding narrative and eschatological horizon. Lafont believes this cannot be done without a proper understanding of creation. The purpose of Lafont's relation of the theme of Being to creation is to underscore the ethical and historical finality of creation and to situate the meaning of particular being in this context.

Lafont realizes that humankind cannot be the ultimate principle of its own historicity; thus, a metaphysics is needed, one in which "compact thinking" would not force Supreme Being, Being in common, time, and consciousness under any controlled notion of presence or static representation. Therefore, Lafont's resolution is his proposal of how to combine narrative and analogy with what he calls a heteronomy.¹³ This balance is the ground for his understanding of the relationship between God, time, and Being and his belief in the necessity of a narrative of origins.

Chauvet and Lafont: On Being and Language

The first and primary topic dealt with is the language of Being and Heidegger's charge that Western metaphysics has "forgotten" Being. Chauvet's "new way" (or what he calls the "transitive way") is bound to this charge inasmuch as Chauvet rethinks the use of instrumental language as a tool of manipulation and control. He pinpoints in the history of sacramental theology a manipulative and instrumental reduction in the explanation of the mediation of sacrament and the language of grace.

Chauvet appeals to Heidegger to avoid reducing things to their utilitarian function and to express the need for poetic language, giving them their

¹³ *God, Time, and Being* 127; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 138. To further probe the importance of "listening," Lafont turns to humankind's need for a founding heteronomy or foundational narrative. Traditionally, heteronomy has signaled the opposite of an autonomous relationship: it is a relationship of thought and action that is based on the consensus of others for its structure and form. Lafont explains his understanding of the beginnings of a heteronomous narrative, "So the confidence of an identity and the freedom and security of a human life depend at a very profound level on the actions and on the word of someone other than the self—from the very beginning." The heteronomy that Lafont speaks of comes from a narrative that is not "produced," rather, a narrative that is based on and validated by experience, that is an "event" that is witnessed to and carried on in testimony. A founding narrative that is based in experience is able to yield an authenticity that ensures the livelihood of the narrative in testimony and heteronomy. The witness that is given in testimony signals the possibility of the narrative's heteronomy. The enduring quality of the narrative then becomes its mark of authenticity.

fullness and their embodiment of Being. He knows that, in Heidegger, Being is not to be confused with God, and Chauvet does not want to speak of God in this way. However, in what Heidegger says of poetic language and the advent of Being he finds inspiration for a way of explaining what revelation and sacrament say of God's advent to the world. This allows Chauvet to speak in terms of gift rather than cause in explaining sacramental mediation.

Chauvet finds this approach to language a new terrain or ground for sacramental discourse and for the analysis of sacrament's performative role. Lafont, on the other hand, is content with an analogy of faith as a way of drawing attention to the interplay of story and image and helping us see the significance or meaning of narrative. To the analogy of faith Lafont unites the analogy of being as the means by which a narrative's full meaning and reference are unfolded. Chauvet rejects this type of return to metaphysics.

Chauvet, following Heidegger's philosophy of language, asserts that humans and language are inseparable: to be human is to let go of any sort of metaphysical notion that humankind possesses language or can adequately represent realities. According to Chauvet, humankind must let go of language as a possession. In this letting go, we are able to attend to the call of God, who is not to be confused with Being, either in Heideggerian or in Thomistic terms. This is a call that does not ask for words in response, but silence. In this way Chauvet's theology is very distinct from Lafont's. While Lafont believes one can "hear" the reoccurrence of the founding narrative in subsequent liturgical proclamations, Chauvet shows the link that unites God's advent, the gift of grace, listening, silence, and the "trace." Chauvet allows for the hearing of the original event and proclamation in the "trace," but within what he sees as the limits of language's ability to "represent."

For Chauvet, speaking requires learning to listen well and submitting to the process of allowing ourselves to be spoken by language. It is also learning to be patient with silence, where we are called to be attentive to an event or happening. Using concepts from Heidegger's philosophy, Chauvet suggests that it is in listening and in being spoken, within language itself, that one can find a "coming-to-presence" of what is summoned, the coming of an advent that is essentially marked by a stroke of absence.¹⁴ Chauvet then calls the absence-in-presence of what comes gratuitously a *trace*, a trace of a "passage that is always already past,"¹⁵ for this gracious coming cannot be represented as being.

¹⁴ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 58; *Symbole et sacrement* 63.

¹⁵ "Trace d'un passage toujours-déjà passé, trace donc d'un absent" (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 58; *Symbole et sacrement* 63).

Taken from Emmanuel Lévinas's philosophy,¹⁶ Chauvet's use of "trace" is what he considers an attentive silence or the holding of ourselves in a mature proximity to grace. The trace marks an openness to what comes as grace. The trace beckons us to a "beyond" where the openness of being unfolds in grace. This new way of thinking allows us to abandon the God of onto-theology and leads us to a more divine God.

Chauvet's link of *advent* (and what advents) to *trace* leads to his consideration of the concepts of presence and absence, themes that are predominant in Heidegger's philosophy and postmodern discourse. Chauvet suggests that we are to hold ourselves in "a mature proximity to the absent" and that in this holding or waiting we are linked to grace. In this sense, Chauvet fashions out of Heidegger's philosophy a discourse of grace where God's presence in absence is understood as pure grace or gift. This new way of thinking about the presence of God allows him to abandon the God of onto-theology and suggest that humankind can truly "be opened" before the advent of what is beyond all the discourse of Being.

This approach reveals Chauvet's acceptance of the deconstructing analysis of language and its reference. Chauvet expects from language a medium for journeying. He introduces and relies on the concept of absence because it retains a sense of suspicion about language and hence frees language from instrumental use. When free from an instrumental use of language, Chauvet likens our journeying in and through language to a mystical "emptying" where humankind abandons its desire for totality and immediacy:

Emptiness is not nothing; *the absence is precisely the place from which humans come to their truth* by overcoming all the barriers of objectifying and calculating reason. This task is burdensome. Is there anything more difficult than to hold oneself in such a "mature proximity to the absence of the god," than to agree to the presence of that which is lacking?¹⁷

Lafont, however, does not discuss what remains "absent." Instead, he

¹⁶ See Emmanuel Lévinas, *Time and the Other*, trans. R. A. Cohen (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University, 1969). Chauvet prefers Lévinas's articulation of sensibility, language and time through the "trace." For Lévinas, the issue of the "trace" arises through thinking of time in relation to the transcendence of the Other, although this does not necessarily imply that the alterity is a personal Other. His aim in this work is to show that time is not the achievement of an isolated and lone subject, but that it is the very relationship of the subject with the Other. The trace is thus absolutely primary, and memory becomes the response to or receiving of an immemorial affection. The affection of time is not an auto-affection but an affection with structure that for Lévinas is both traumatic and messianic.

¹⁷ "Le vide n'est pas rien. *Le manique est justement le lieu d'où l'homme peut venir à sa vérité*, en débordant toutes les clôtures de la raison objectivante et calculante. La tâche est onéreuse. Y a-t-il rien de plus difficile que de se tenir ainsi 'dans une mûre proximité au manqué (du dieu)', que de *consentir à cette 'présence du manqué'?*" (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 63; *Symbole et sacrement* 67).

argues, the language most proper for theology is one that does not insist on the “ever-greater distance,” but rather on the ever-greater resemblance that respects *difference*.¹⁸ For Lafont, the narrative gives way to doxology, and in doxology humankind enters into the mystery among us. He writes of this relationship between God and humankind, “God is he who comes (and who speaks) on his own initiative, freely (the Father), he to whom he comes (the crucified Son), he who comes as God even in death itself (the Spirit). This divine dynamic takes place for us, that is to say it is impossible to think God without an ‘overflowing’ of his Being toward nothingness and sin.”¹⁹ There is then in revelation an emptying of God in so far as God takes on the forms of nothingness in order to be in the world as gift.

Lafont, therefore, does not focus on the topic of absence. He substitutes an ongoing emphasis on *difference* that has repercussions for his theology of God and the place of sacrament, Scripture, and tradition within the life of the Church. According to Lafont, God comes to the heart of the world, acting in it, and bringing about a history that is always open to the faith of those who live in the world. In coming, however, God is opened to the appearance of nothingness and abides wherein there exists the reality of sin. Therefore, Lafont’s emphasis steers away from discussions of the “absent one” in favor an understanding of God as “hidden at the core of the world.” In God’s hidden presence, the nothingness of this world is surmounted in the loving Word that is revealed as the ultimate essence of God, a presence that offers hope for the future in the gift of transcendent mystery.²⁰

The difference in the way Chauvet and Lafont approach the themes of presence and absence parallels the difference in the way these two authors approach Heidegger’s philosophy. Chauvet fashions a theology with an understanding of revelation as God’s “trace” in humanity and creation. By focusing on hermeneutics, he is able to explain historicity and identity by way of the sacramental celebration and therefore give more attention to the “hidden” aspects of God’s self-giving.

Lafont, on the other hand, remains less suspicious of ontology and language and avoids basing his theology on postulations of “lack” or absence. For Lafont, the expression “Act of Being” allows a reference to the mysterious reality that is at the core of everything and causes us to marvel “that there should be.” He also asserts that it is particular being that allows the

¹⁸ Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 272; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 288.

¹⁹ “Dieu est celui qui vient (et qui parle) à partir de soi, librement (le Père), celui vers qui il vient (le Fils crucifié), celui qui vient comme Dieu jusque dans la mort même (l'Esprit); et cette dynamique divine se réalise *pour nous*, c'est-à-dire qu'il est impossible de penser Dieu sans un ‘débordement’ de son être vers le néant et le péché” (Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 273; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 289).

²⁰ Lafont, *God, Time, and Being* 274; *Dieu, le temps et l'être* 290.

mind to transcend every definition of essence, every measurement of quality, and every historical insertion in time to grasp the “pure actuality of the Being which the particular truly is,” and where *Being in Act* can be identified as a name for God.

In light of Heidegger’s critique, Lafont and Chauvet differ in terms of language’s capacity to speak of God. This has repercussions on how they construe the fundamental paschal narrative of sacramental memorial and on their approach to the use of the language of being in discourse about God.

Lafont and Chauvet: On the Paschal Narrative

Chauvet articulates his own desire to rethink the language of the paschal mystery from within language itself. His attention to hermeneutics only bolsters his conclusion that sacramental theology must abandon causality and the idea of God as self-cause and the first cause of all things. Chauvet turns to the cross to show it as a divine epiphany by which God can be glimpsed in the midst of human suffering. With an emphasis on the gratuity of God’s self-revelation in the cross comes an emphasis on the freedom of humankind to respond to God’s advent in the pasch of Christ. Thus, for Chauvet, the cross of Christ demands a new kind of expression, one that realizes the cross as “eventing” constantly in the Church.

Chauvet’s approach to the paschal narrative differs from Lafont’s approach in its attention to symbolic exchange. Chauvet finds limits in symbolic language in what can be said about God. As a result, he resorts to the notion of “trace” to get away from any recourse to myth and meta-narrative or to the language of being. Chauvet’s construal of the paschal narrative then accentuates the otherness of God and God’s self-effacement in revelation, particularly the cross, where Chauvet then reiterates his ideas about absence. He writes:

If God’s revelation thus finds its decisive turn in Jesus’ cross, if the relation of God and humankind finds its focal point there also (and, only by way of the cross, in the incarnation), this demands that the representation of “God” be lifted to another plane than that of onto-theology. For, ultimately, the latter is always bound to a God used in “principle of validation of humans by humans” (see Descartes). By its very logic, onto-theology rules out letting God be God. For this letting-be takes “God” away from us: “God is close to us insofar as God is the one who retreats”; and at the same time, this letting-be takes us away from ourselves: “God is not close to us except through distancing us from ourselves.” However, it is such an essential decentering of ourselves that the historical and concrete reality of the cross commands us to carry out.²¹

²¹ “Si la révélation de Dieu trouve ainsi dans la croix de Jésus son tournant décisif, si le rapport de Dieu et de l’homme trouve là également son point focal (et,

Chauvet interprets the death of Jesus in such a way that the traditional metaphysical scheme of *difference* (between humankind and God) must be abandoned. For Chauvet, the symbolic scheme of "otherness" signals a difference that is intrinsically connected to an identity or likeness between two realities. The realities of God and humankind come into existence only as they are crossed out by each other (just as presence is construed by absence). For Chauvet then, otherness is the symbolic place where all communication takes place, because the other is subject and not object.²²

Lafont, on the other hand, takes the category of memorial as a remembrance of a historical event, and by placing memorial action in time and place, offers another way of getting away from the problems associated with myth or meta-narrative in speaking of God's presence, action, and revelation. In doing this, Lafont gives a more positive account of the foundational paschal narrative as it expresses God's presence and donation, and the revelation of the names of Father, Son, and Spirit. According to Lafont, God withdraws so that humankind may enter freely into the ever-expanding depths of its relationship with God, beyond all gifts given and received. This marks the relationship of the "Son." The relationship of "Spirit" consequently brings light, discernment and strength to humankind as it confronts the risks of relationship with God.

Lafont's account of symbolic exchange differs from Chauvet's because it announces the advent of a God who is different, but this difference does not mean totally unknowable or unutterable. For Lafont, real symbolic exchange occurs in relationship where the reciprocity had in symbol is different from the give-and-take reciprocity expected from that of the sign. The symbol does not demand any substantive counter-response, only the possibility of response that is openness to the possibility of being and the welcome of gift.

Using this paradigm of symbolic exchange to address God's advent in history, Lafont shows how the paschal narrative integrates specific narratives like the Garden of Eden and the trial of Job and how analogical discourse is necessary to probe the fuller meaning of the varying images of

à partir de là seulement, dans l'Incarnation), cela requiert que la représentation de 'Dieu' soit portée sur un autre plan que celui de l'onto-théologie. Car celle-ci a toujours partie liée, en définitive, avec un Dieu utilisé comme 'principe de validation de l'homme par lui-même' (cf. Descartes). Elle s'interdit ainsi d'emblée, de par sa logique même, de laisser Dieu être Dieu. Car ce laisser-être nous enlève 'Dieu': 'Dieu est proche de nous en tant que celui qui est en retrait'; et simultanément, il nous enlève à nous-mêmes: 'Dieu n'est proche de nous qu'en nous éloignant de nous-mêmes.' C'est pourtant cet essentiel décentrage que nous commande l' *extra nos* historique et concret de la croix" (Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 499; *Symbole et sacrement* 510).

²² Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 503; *Symbole et sacrement* 514.

God and humankind revealed there. Lafont also shows how the divine names correspond to different levels and different times in history that must be taken into account. For this reason, the paschal narrative eludes any type of onto-theological explanation while at the same time “naming God” by virtue of the action performed in the Resurrection. The paschal narrative then remains tied to humanity’s immediate experience/relationship with God while simultaneously referring to a world beyond it.

For Lafont, the paschal narrative also renders testimony to the economy of time, that of an ongoing access to the mutual perfection of the relationship between humankind and God. The paschal narrative reveals that human history is a pedagogy of sonship, where sonship is an ongoing and sometimes painful process. The only proper response to this call of sonship is perseverance in doxology and obedience, and perseverance is the way to situate oneself in time, and in face of the transcendent.

While both authors can be said to converge in their concern for articulating the proper respect for humankind’s relationship with God, and the centrality of the paschal narrative in understanding this relationship, Chauvet attempts this sort of respect using a sense of distance and metaphor (*Other*) while Lafont prefers the use of analogy. In addressing the role of sacrament in a postmodern context, a look at how Lafont and Chauvet approach the use of analogy and causality provides another demonstration of how Lafont’s theology remains distinct in its retrieval of certain elements from the metaphysical tradition.

Lafont’s Contribution to Sacramental Theology

When seen in conjunction with Chauvet’s theology, Lafont’s preference to retain some measure of ontological discourse in theology can be reviewed. While Lafont is careful in his use of ontological discourse, he nevertheless makes an argument for its retention that is opposed to Chauvet’s turn to me-ontology. For Lafont, the real problem in onto-theology’s use of the language of Being comes in speaking of God, the use of the categories of the necessary, the absolute, and *causa sui*, as well as the notion of divine presence. Lafont counters this problem with his analogical understanding of God as Being in Act.

While Chauvet speaks of a God who becomes through suffering, Lafont finds that this mode of speaking continues to use human terms and expressions that are inadequate. Instead, Lafont turns to the primary analogy of *gift*, as it is biblically based, to think of God as Being in Act, where the primary act of divine donation is transcendent to time. In grasping the meaning of donation, Lafont thinks that the act of Being is the hermeneutical key. Thus, any discourse on the “being of finite creatures” must be understood against the narratives of creation and redemption where being,

in its act, is totally gift and where God is totally donation. For Lafont, it is the doxology of the liturgy that confirms the possibility of this analogy.

Chauvet, on the other hand, understands God's presence/manifestation as a historical existence, a gift of grace, where salvation is mediated historically rather than through creation. It is in ritual action, symbolic exchange, that Chauvet suggests we encounter God's otherness and graciousness most intensely. For Chauvet, the act of creation by the divine word is an act of differentiation, where we are called to recognize meaning in the holiness-difference of God who creates by withdrawing from the world (an event solemnized on the seventh day of creation). This distancing and difference marks the rupture of a sacramental presence-in-absence.²³

Lafont, on the other hand, makes an appeal to the analogy of being and to narrativity that allows for a sacramental theology that does not try to conceptualize history in its totality, or to resort to causal thinking that presumes an ontology of the divine nature. In Lafont's theology, the paschal narrative as the foundational narrative for Christianity is not treated as a past event to be reenacted for its efficacy. It is treated as an event that has its power in the recounting, the *récit*, where the power to change the horizon of existence and to offer future generations new possibilities of being is unfolded.

Lafont's theology also allows for the gratuity of gift while retaining a foundation in language with which to speak about the relationship between gift, giving, and giver. With his argument for the retention of ontological discourse, he is able to balance modernity's concern with the human subject with postmodernity's emphasis on negation and surrender of faith. Lafont's contribution to sacramental theology is his belief in the power of the narrative to relay the reality of gift, of being, while acknowledging the importance of the intersubjective as a testing ground for the truth and love born of communion.

In this, Lafont and Chauvet's sacramentally based responses to the critique of onto-theology are different, and it is here proposed that Lafont's theology is a preferable response. While Chauvet's theology does give more importance to an analysis of language, both performative and deconstructionist, and to the dominance of a metaphor of gift and exchange (with a strong sense of divine absence/Other), Lafont argues that one may move directly from the analogy of faith to the analogy of being, a move that is needed and can be today retrieved within a sense of gift as origin.

Lafont's theological method stands out because he uses a principle of narrativity to ground heteronomy and contextualizes this in the eucharistic celebration where there is memorial and doxology. He outlines his reading of the paschal narrative as a process, with an interplay of images that allow

²³ Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* 548–55; *Symbole et sacrement* 559–66.

for the revealing and naming of God as Father, Son, and Spirit. He also relates the Easter narrative to two other narratives, those of Eden and Job, to show how the founding *récit* of Christianity is inextricably linked to other biblical narratives that address the issues of origins, evil, and doxology.

When considering the place of sacrament in the postmodern context, Lafont's theology allows us to see and speak about God's action in the past and in the present, and to further recognize the "names" of God revealed in this action. Lafont's theology allows more room for God-talk and an affirmation of communion in memorial and sacrament, whereas Chauvet's theology seemingly remains centered on the human and God's absence. Because Lafont's theology acknowledges a ground in language (being) upon which to base a discussion of revelation and relationship with God, it can be practically used in any discussion of sacrament.

Another favorable indication of Lafont's theology is its practical and apologetic nature; it is a theology that assumes the willingness of faith and the reliability of the narrative to enjoin those celebrating and listening in the sacramental encounter. This apologetic method is indeed very fitting for any consideration of sacrament and ritual action in the postmodern context because it is unabashedly honest about its starting point in faith and its ensuing conviction that ritual action is a meaningful way to encounter and recall humankind's relationship to creation and its creator. Lafont does not make any attempt to meld his position into a Heideggerian framework or to draw out of Heidegger's work the basis for an apophatic narrative theology. Instead, he remains practical in his assessment of the postmodern suspicion of meta-narratives.

Lafont achieves this practicality by turning his focus away from theoretical arguments about the purpose and possibility of a meta-narrative to the Easter narrative, and the way two other biblical narratives, that of Eden and Job, support a liturgically based theology of narrative and doxology. His argument is not decidedly for or against the paschal narrative as a meta-narrative; instead, Lafont's theology is based on the action of the *récit* as a liturgical action: the proclamation of God's advent in creation and history as an ongoing proclamation of the Word. Lafont's theology is therefore more attentive to time, particularly the present time, place, and people of the sacramental celebration.

In further assessing Lafont's contribution to sacramental theology, particularly his understanding of the *récit* as a liturgical action, it is helpful to review Lafont's writings in light of David Power's theology and its formulation of sacrament as language-event.

SACRAMENT AS LANGUAGE-EVENT

David N. Power's theology provides a comprehensive study of the language of the sacramental celebration, particularly sacrament as language-

event. Power's theology complements Lafont's theology in its provision of a more in depth review of the traditions and codes of celebration, that is how the liturgy embraces many forms of language in ritual action, word proclaimed, and blessing prayer.²⁴ Though Lafont's theology can be understood as responsive to the critiques of postmodernity and the science of hermeneutics, Power relates his theology to hermeneutics in a more thorough manner than does Lafont. Power's writings then allow for a better integration of the art of hermeneutics in the examination of liturgical texts and of scriptural texts incorporated into sacramental memorial.

Power defines a hermeneutical approach to a tradition and language as one that starts with a keen sense of listening and of being addressed. In this address, speaking and writing mark responses to what has been given to us, an engagement that is attentive to being first addressed. Power writes: "It is in such simple, yet difficult, perceptions that hermeneutics is rooted."²⁵ Power, therefore, sees contemporary hermeneutics as analyses of the relation between human language and human being in action. Hermeneutics is not merely about reading codes properly, but about living within them and from what they convey or hand on.

Power also offers a description of how hermeneutics affects the Christian community as it celebrates and responds to the Word proclaimed. This sort of address is left lacking in Lafont's approach to narrativity and ritual action. Lafont assumes the work of hermeneutics but does not explain his own understanding of interpretation and how it affects his articulation of *récit* and ritual action. As a result, he does not explore his own reference to the importance of bodily ritual, a point that is more fully developed by Power.

For Power, ritual action is about the reality of God, a loving God who enters human time and events. Even though these events take place in a specific time, place, people, and culture, they proclaim the love of God in the present and offer a promise for the future. As these events become transposed in the telling of the *récit*, they are appropriated into the lives of people in other times, places, cultures. This process of appropriation signals the work of interpretation that is none other than attending to what is offered in word and rite, to the forms of expression within their temporal and cultural modality, and to what emerges through these forms.²⁶ It is this attentiveness that opens one to the creativeness of word, ritual, artistic forms and to revelation, expressions that go beyond the immediacy of the given.

Power's attention to various questions of time, mediation, social inclusion/exclusion, and philosophical orientation helps to organize his work as it deals with hermeneutics and postmodern critiques. Power is therefore

²⁴ Power, *Sacrament* 76.

²⁶ *Ibid.* 6–7.

²⁵ *Ibid.* 5.

clearer than Lafont in his working definitions of the role of hermeneutics and the place of postmodern critiques. As a result, he is better able to develop his argument of sacrament as “language-event” because of the premises and boundaries he attaches to his own theological language. These premises and boundaries provide a broader understanding of the place of sacraments in the Christian economy, a greater attention to the interpretive process within which a community is engaged, and a better understanding of sacrament as a language-event and as gift.

Key to Power’s theology is the attention he gives to the issues of language in sacramental theology, a means for addressing what is taking place in the sacramental encounter and how the Church deals with liturgical tradition and change. Lafont does not expressly take up these issues and therefore his understanding of the interpretive process is often left lacking. By addressing the process of interpretation and its purpose, Power gives a better focus to the whole of sacramental action as it is composed by ritual action, word proclaimed, and blessing prayer.

As Power points out, Christian sacrament is fascinating because in tradition and in actual practice it embraces many forms of language. He describes why he believes the heuristic of language-event is the most apt way to speak about sacrament and memorial:

It seems an apt heuristic with which to engage the note of the discontinuous and the disruptive that marks our sensitivity to broken time. It allows us to see God’s action in the past and in the present, without having to relate them by an unbroken sequence of events and without having to look for some causative force outside language usage itself. A ritual or sacramental event relates to an event within time past through the capacities and power of language to carry it forward and to allow it to enter afresh into lives, however they may have been disrupted and broken.²⁷

Power’s explanation fleshes out Lafont’s accent on narrativity in that it gives due consideration to sacrament as language-event, to the power of the *récit* to free us from the boundaries of a chronological approach to history. Similarly, the heuristic of language-event allows more room for creativity in the interpretation of texts and ritual action, interpretations that result in the emergence of new meaning and relationships.

Power also describes how the heuristic of language-event is ultimately practical. This sort of practicality has already been discussed in regard to Lafont’s theology, but Power takes it a step further in connecting his purpose for practicality to the dual nature of sacramental language and to the economy of gift. As Power explains, the heuristic of language-event can also be called a heuristic of *poesis* and *praxis* because it is concerned with the forms and power of language while at the same time with the paradigms of Christ-like action that are evoked through the language.

²⁷ Ibid. 75.

This dual nature of sacramental language is tied to an understanding of sacrament as gift, because the twofold mission of Word and Spirit is understood as coming from the Father as gift. Power writes:

To express his own self-giving, Christ took what by creation and earth's bounty are already gifts given. Through this medium, he gave sacramental form to his own self-giving. The gift/giving of God through Word and Spirit is continually manifested in the sacramental self-giving of Christ through the memorial of his death and in the gift of the Spirit which works from within to allow the Church to take this memorial into the actuality of the Christian community.²⁸

Power draws more attention to the role of the Spirit than does Lafont, especially in his dealing with the dual nature of sacrament as *poesis* and *praxis*. According to Power, as a language-event, the Christian sacrament is the event of God's Word in the *Spirit*.²⁹ Following this Spirit, we recognize that the "body" of Christ is a community of disciples that is always engaged ethically on the way of discipleship. Thus, for Power, the interplay between worship and ethics is inescapable, where *poesis* expresses the ideal of *praxis* for the community engaged by Word and Spirit.

With his understanding of the relationship between *poesis* and *praxis*, Power is able to address the role of the Church in sacramental theology, another aspect that is not dealt with fully in Lafont's theology. Power writes: "Sacraments do not stand on their own. They are interwoven with institutions, lives, histories, personages. The exploration of a liturgical tradition involves connecting the liturgical actions, known through the evidence of traditions, with these realities."³⁰

Overall, Power's attention to sacraments as language-event balances Lafont's presentation of narrativity and analogy. Power fills in several theoretical and topical points that are left out of Lafont's exclusive treatment of the relationship between analogy and narrative. Power's attention to language and the nuances of ritual activity also lends itself to a clearer formulation of what constitutes revelation as it relates to sacrament.

Power concludes his systematic reflections by suggesting that what is left (for any consideration of sacrament in a postmodern context) is the need for further contemplation of the horizon of mystery and praise, a contemplation that ultimately ends in wonder and silence. In this contemplation, he suggests we look to the founding narratives of creation, cross, and resurrection for orientation, but that we eventually cease speaking in contemplation of what is given. Of this silence Power writes: "Whether one prefers the more apophatic approach or this postmodern retrieval of the language of Being, theological inquiry certainly needs to cease in doxology

²⁸ Ibid. 85.

²⁹ Ibid.76.

³⁰ Ibid. 87.

and refresh itself in the act of wonder in face of the gift of life that is given through Word and Spirit.”³¹

CONCLUSION

Just as Power concludes with the recognition that further contemplation of the horizon of mystery and praise is needed, the same can be said at the conclusion of this project. By situating Lafont's theology in relation to two other contemporary sacramental theologians, a clearer picture of his contribution to sacramental theology emerges. However, the picture is far from complete.

When viewed in relation to Chauvet and Power's writings respectively, Lafont's theology can be found to lack several key points crucial to a contemporary sacramental theology. For an adequate address of the role of sacrament from within a postmodern perspective, the following issues would also have to be dealt with at length: (1) More explanation of the relation of Scripture and sacrament to Church; (2) more explanation of the inclusion of the body and bodily ritual in sacramental exchange; (3) a better attention to hermeneutical issues, within a greater attention to the histories of sacramental tradition and the event character of sacrament; (4) more attention to the limits of God-talk, which emerge through an analysis of language, and which could be integrated into the appeal to the analogy of being; (5) more reference to the Holy Spirit in an understanding of sacrament and also in a theology of God.

However, this project has shown that Lafont's theology makes an important contribution to sacramental theology both in method and content. Methodologically, Lafont looks “through” the critiques of meta-narrative and onto-theology for an appropriate ground for theology. He finds this ground in the liturgy, in the ongoing doxology and memorial centered in Christ's pasch. He also provides a framework for a theology of God in the liturgy, in the proclamation of a God who advents in love, in the particulars of time and in history, as Father, Son, and Spirit.

The content of Lafont's theology is centered on the Easter narrative and how other biblical narratives support a retrieval of a theology of creation through analogy. His argument takes on the critiques of onto-theology while remaining faithful to the relation and purpose of biblical and eucharistic discourse. This balance is not only difficult, but also unpopular in contemporary systematic dialogue. Lafont's theology offers a balanced voice in the midst of many reactionary currents, particularly those demanding the either/or of a radical orthodoxy or a nihilist textualism.

Though often elusive and convoluted, Lafont's move from an analogy of

³¹ Ibid. 310.

faith in naming God to an analogy of being is presented here as vital for sacramental discourse. Because of its balance and steadfast belief in the biblical narrative, Lafont's contribution to sacramental theology is both challenging and faithful. It is fair to say that Lafont's theology respectively embodies Pope John Paul II's charge to philosophers and theologians:

I appeal also to *philosophers*, and to all *teachers of philosophy*, asking them to have the courage to recover, in the flow of an enduringly valid philosophical tradition, the range of authentic wisdom and truth—metaphysical truth included—which is proper to philosophical inquiry.³²

Lafont's theology accepts the reality of postmodern disillusionment without in turn abolishing the whole thrust of the theological tradition. In this sense, Lafont's theology is a recovery of the range of authentic wisdom and truth. Lafont's response is also courageous because it is grounded in his belief that the founding *récit* of Christianity is simply the account of a God who makes and keeps covenant. This story, according to Lafont, offers one the possibility of hope in the all-inclusive story of a triune God who creates, redeems, and unifies as manifestation of perfect love for the whole world. This hope, both practical and pastoral, makes Lafont's theology all the more suitable for a contemporary understanding of sacrament and ritual action.

³² Pope John Paul II, *Fides et ratio* no. 106.



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