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Religious Mouths and Religious Bodies: Speaking the Body of Christ at St. Bede Parish

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**Religious Mouths and Religious Bodies:
Speaking the Body of Christ at St. Bede Parish**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in Anthropology from
The College of William and Mary

by

Jonna Knappenberger

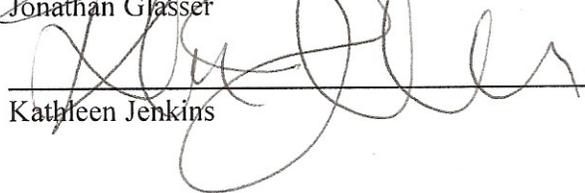
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Brad Weiss, Director



Jonathan Glasser



Kathleen Jenkins

Williamsburg, Virginia
December 11, 2009

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Introduction

Bible study always opens with the lighting of a candle and a prayer inviting God to join us. That's how Sue and Charlie¹, two of the class leaders, find it most appropriate to think about the word of God – in his presence. One evening, we met in the parish house pantry, twenty-eight people at three tables, and the pale candle glow casting a crucifix-shaped shadow onto the shelves of canned goods and dried pasta around us.

These Bible studies are a forum for Catholics to ply their faith outside of mass. Parishioners in the pantry on Tuesday nights have all the materials to practice with – the people, the words, the Bibles. Each session is an exercise in being piously Catholic.

At my table, Gary led with a prayer and the others followed – Julie, Steve, Sarah, around in a circle, one at a time until there was silence. This session featured the passion of Jesus and we had discussion questions, as usual, to guide us. As we read through the questions, Joe breathed in to start talking, waited a moment in thought, and then asked: *It says there were 120 disciples in that room filled with the Holy Spirit before Jesus died. We only hear about 12 in Mark. What happened to the other 108?*² We all looked at each other, some of us leafing through our Bibles to find the verse. Gary, the designated group leader, answered, *I have a sense that they were spreading the word and dying for it. That was good enough for the moment.*

Our discussion continued. *How was Jesus' death like a new exodus, like manna in the desert to the Israelites? What does "Do this in memory of me" actually mean? If we are one body and we all eat the same body of Christ, then are we all related as one family? Why so much bread and what does it mean? What was it like for Mary?*

¹ Some names have been changed. Those whose names are not changed gave me their permission.

² As I explain later, I have placed direct quotes of spoken and written texts in italics.

Sometimes the stories of the passion bring up difficult questions to answer. *How could Judas have committed the ultimate betrayal, by eating the bread and selling Jesus out?* In situations like this, conflicts in Christ's life can translate to conflicts in our own lives. *Material things are just a small part of reality*, Gary explained, *which is why Judas was wrong. Hard times can cause us to deny Christ, like Judas. But, everyone agreed, the choice is ultimately personal.* It is up to the individual to "fill the gap" in the story and right the wrongs.

Sarah, a young woman who fights her own battle with cerebral palsy, said, *God's been knocking on my door a lot lately. He's there if nobody else is there except the dog and Him. He's there. I've never denied Him, but I've wanted to have a break.* Julie praised Sarah for *drawing on an inner strength that the rest of us don't have.* Sarah is both blessed and cursed by her burden.

At the end of our discussion, and after watching the video Sue had chosen, the candle was extinguished. Sue prayed for a list of people. *Please help Julie's sister-in-law, who has cancer, and for Nancy who just had surgery...* We joined hands and closed our eyes or bowed our heads. Barbara blew out the candle. *Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...* As Sue looked over at me, we traced the cross on our bodies. Afterwards, some stayed to pray over Sarah.

###

The word *body* is used in a variety of ways. It might mean a particular human body (*my body*) or God's temple (*God's body*). Or it could describe the body and blood on the altar during mass (*the body of Christ*), or the literal body of Christ on the cross (*Christ's body*). *Body* and *bread of life* may each refer to something physical like a

person, piece of bread, or wafer; or things less tangible, like a group, Christ's presence, or Bible stories.

Catholics use language in religious ways, including ambiguous but meaningful words, movements, expressions, jokes, utterances, and metaphors. While the religious language is employed by parishioners of St. Bede Parish, it derives its authority from the clergy. Speakers, clergy or lay, thus reiterate and reinforce doctrine and its powerful moral framework. On an individual level, in Bible studies and friendships, metaphors are revisited by parishioners, to authenticate their experiences and identities as really Catholic. When lay people use these metaphors, they are inviting the presence of God, and evoking the presence of the clergy.

The moral force of this religious language varies. When placed in the contexts of high-risk bodily choices – especially when discussing reproduction, fertility, and abortion decisions – there is distinct deployment of the discourse. The authority and power of the clergy is exercised into a clear moral imperative for action or inaction. This leads to a hyper-sensitive code³, where speaking about faith mingles with speaking about bodies. In cases where the ambiguity of the metaphors might lead to contradictory or unfavorable (to the church) outcomes, the clergy *answers questions* to clarify the discourse – to realign and renew it.

My aim in this paper is to dissect Catholic metaphors of presence taken from a period of extended ethnographic research at St. Bede Parish in Williamsburg, Virginia. Religious discourse in this community serves as a code connecting a clergy authorized by God and parishioners seeking to know that God. The language itself asserts a set of

³ Though the word “register” is also acceptable and used in similar studies. See Harding 2000.

physical and metaphysical realities, and is situated in an inscribed and performed set of histories.

Though the metaphors are used frequently by pious parishioners, it is ultimately the church hierarchy who holds the keys to their meanings. In fact, as I intend to show, parishioners employ this coded religious discourse for the precise reason that, through it, church voices dominate and authorize their everyday experience.

###

Why did I decide to put a “normal” American religious community under the anthropological lens? The embarrassment I first felt for this project, I think now, came from the silences in academia on the subject – silences I am not alone in noticing.⁴

Three overlapping assumptions have impeded the anthropological encounter with Christianity. It is assumed that (1) “normal” American life is familiar and known, (2) Christianity is also a known and unitary phenomenon, and (3) studying a nearly-native religion exposes an ethnographer to the dangerous possibility of conversion. Each of these assumptions exposes the ethnographer of Christianity to special problems of authorizing and developing their work within a skeptical academy.

The first assumption reveals anthropology’s eternal love affair with exotic others (Nader 1972). It is, indeed, more difficult to see people who live and work around us as others, objects for study. I never realized the number of Catholics in my own life – my landlord, his wife, people in the anthropology department, classmates, and friends. Others are scattered throughout the college and the town. They are no more exotic to me, in many ways, than I am to myself.

⁴ Every work on Christianity I have read has in some way spoken to the institutional pull *away* from studying this religion. (Asad 1993, Cannell 2006, Harding 2000, Keane 2007, Orsi 2005, Robbins 2003)

Father John Abe, the presiding priest of the parish, told me St. Bede hosts more than 3,500 families, around 9,000 people. (Williamsburg and surrounding James City County population is around 74,800 and there are two other parishes nearby.)⁵ St. Bede is not a small church, and it is not notably “exotic.” Nonetheless, it is in itself deserving of study.

St. Bede aside, studying Christians is an even greater hurdle to the legitimacy of my project. Cannell writes, “There has often been a tendency to assume that Christianity... does not require fresh and constantly renewed examination” (2006, 3). Likely the outcome of our own historical situation, we (anthropologists and Americans) intuit that Christianity remains unchanged from countryside churches and cathedrals of Europe – a notion we theoretically insist on disproving for every other culture.

Rather than monolithic and uniform, Christianities are diverse. If anthropology takes seriously the fundamental notion of local contemporaneous cultural processes, then these apply to Western Christians as well.⁶ My implicit goal is to “challenge both the notion that Christianity is a merely arbitrary category and the notion that it is a completely homogeneous phenomenon” (Cannell 2006, 8). Sensitive comparative studies are necessary to uncover and vocalize diversities, in Western and exotic Catholicisms, in relation to baseline Vatican doctrine. Anthropologists are understandably suspicious of comparative projects – a theoretical hurdle to studying a “world religion” – but it is difficult to erect an “anthropology of Christianity” when we can, at best, merely say

⁵ Only 23 percent of Americans self-identify as Catholic. However, Catholics as Christians are still in the religious majority; almost 78 percent of Americans identify with some form of Christianity. (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life 2008).

⁶ While recognizing the locality of each congregation, I do not wish to imply there isn’t a wider global Christianity, as well. I can’t speak **only** in local terms, which, in Keane’s words, would “risk making it appear as if Christianity were created from scratch each time, or that each church exists in splendid isolation” (Keane 2007, 40).

Christianity is an array of diversities.⁷ To that end, I take “doctrine” seriously, because it, in itself, functions about **and** within the religious world.⁸

Anthropology has deeply entangled roots with this religion. Asad points out that reflexive anthropology began by asking how to fit the “savage” into the Christian universe. Africa and the New World were populated with others “whose kinship to Christian Europeans was highly problematic” (Asad 1993, 20). In postcolonial times, however, genuinely reflexive projects can “deepen [our] understanding of the West as something more than a threadbare ideology” (Asad 1993, 23).

At the heart of the discomfort between anthropology and Christianity, Robbins (2003) argues, is the critique the discipline levels at the modernist epistemological tradition, which it is itself predicated upon. In other words, studying this religion might “challenge liberal versions of modernity of the kind most anthropologists subscribe to” (Robbins 2003). With less difference between observer and observed, fewer culture shocks are available to guide the research agenda, which makes it difficult when the “major ideas [anthropology] uses to grasp its subjects (nonmodern, local, traditional) are often dependent on its contrastive sense of the modern” (Asad 1993, 19).

Following the major global transitions of the 20th century in science and religion⁹, there is a general sense of unease that threatens to transform mystical religious experiences into mere delusions. With the rise of modernity, “religious beliefs no longer made sense experientially, no longer could be taken for granted as common sense” (Harding 2000, 270). This “modern disenchantment” theory began with Weber (1930)

⁷ Robbins (2003) points to the successes of creating an anthropology of Islam. We might be lured into an overgeneralization of talking about an “Islamic diaspora.” In contrast, calling Christianities a “Christian diaspora” seems a little absurd. Why is this?

⁸ Keane makes the same argument (2007, 32).

⁹ Especially the transformations of the Second Vatican Council.

and, in Harding's words, "the story of modernity naturalized secularizing processes by making them appear to be the inevitable – natural – outcomes of transhistorical processes" (Harding 2000, 270n2).

It seems the modernist story – which underpins anthropology – threatens Catholic experience of real presence. But all signs point to a world where Catholics feel modern, secular, scientific, and simultaneously devout, traditional, and mystical. Catholics are conscious of both modes.¹⁰ The oft-misunderstood coexistence of modernity and religious experience especially challenges anthropology of Christianity in American settings (the most modern of the modern).

Christians are "neither real others nor real comrades" for anthropologists (Robbins 2003). The people I met were much like my own family and friends, but I too was neither "inside" nor "outside." I struggled with distance and proximity to my subjects, landing somewhere in between, inevitably leaving unanswered questions and undefined relationships for me and the people I befriended. This is a similar approach to Orsi (2005), Harding (2000), and others. "We cannot respect and use the distance between us because we cannot establish it securely – it is forever shrinking and expanding" (Orsi 2005, 162).

Finally, it is assumed a much more dangerous task to study the nearby religious than the far-away. Harding writes, "The membrane between disbelief and belief is much thinner than we think... [Disbelief] also depends for the ethnographer on how adamant your colleagues are about the 'dangers' of doing 'this kind of fieldwork.'" The danger of

¹⁰ Various anthropologists have argued against equating modernity with secularization. See Keane 2007, 46n12.

ethnography is in entering the “space between belief and disbelief, or rather the paradoxical space of overlap” (Harding 2000, 58).

The very epistemology of ethnography requires an amount of self-alteration, denying and confirming ethnographic authority.¹¹ But from the perspective of the academy, self-alteration caused by immersion in a Christian world is an unacceptable political move, making ethnography of Christianity difficult. Personal tensions can develop in the field, where scholars often become entangled with missionary organizations, and in academic departments. Nonetheless, seeing conversion as a major threat flies in the face of theories of ethnography insisting on subject/object boundaries **and** postmodern theories unequivocally denying the existence of any such boundaries.

Studying Christians in America is inherently politically charged. “At once the most tediously familiar and the most threatening,” Christianity and Catholicism excite incredible anxiety in the anthropological community (Cannell 2006, 3). Americans are raised on safe Protestant stories, historically taught as “religion” to “protect American democracy and inoculate the young against the contagion of American religious imaginings, which scholarship would contain and enclose by nomenclature and analysis” (Orsi 2005, 187). The most important question for Catholics and non-Catholics alike (for opposing reasons) is whether I’m skeptical of the religion. My answer is much longer than one word. Instead, it is many words – a whole language of words – only found in that awkward space between membership and intrusion, belief and disbelief.

I must be clear about my own use of “belief.” The layers of meaning in “belief” are often overlooked, even in attempts at definitions of religion (famously, Geertz 1966).

¹¹ Faye Ginsburg puts it well: “Anthropologists approach self-alteration as a mode of knowing. Our epistemology requires that we alter ourselves in order to know” (Harding 2000, 58n20).

At first, I used “belief” to demonstrate open-mindedness, steering clear of loaded words that would suggest an interest only in theology. I did not want only “authoritative” or “true” answers – but my use of “belief” begged that very question.

As Malcolm Ruel (2008) points out, “belief” is itself a necessarily loaded term, with an ever-changing role in an essentially Christian context. From the Greek and Hebrew beginnings of truth and trust, the definitions of “belief” have shifted to conviction of a person-event (Christ), an initiatory rite of passage (baptism), a declared church-wide orthodoxy (creeds), a personal experience, and most recently to stand for values common to **all** humans, Christian or not. Thus, “we should be clear that [belief] has a Christian use and that this use must affect its connotations in contexts other than Christian” (Ruel 2008, 106-107). This is the Western past dogging our heels.

Ruel comes up with four “shadow fallacies” often assumed to logically follow: belief is central to all religions exactly as it is to Christianity, belief forms behavior, belief is fundamentally psychological, and beliefs are separate from the rest of a person’s lived world (Ruel 2008, 107-109). Now taken to be ontological, these theological premises are important to keep in mind, even in a (uniquely diverse) **Christian** culture.

It is also imperative to note that power in Christian life is not necessarily equivalent to the ascetic medieval Christianity of our imaginations.¹² Religious power is, indeed, an important element in constructing religious truth.¹³ But religious power is deeper and more subtle for Catholics than the *sacrament of reconciliation*. It is alive in their very words.

¹² Most recently, Dan Brown’s novels have conjured images of an albino fanatic Catholic, who spends his time hurting himself or violently hunting down skeptics. Brown’s albino and his modernist skeptic hero, Robert Langdon, now reside in plenty of American bookshelves, movie theaters, television sets, and nightmares.

¹³ Asad asks the question “as a nonbeliever would put it: How does (religious) power create (religious) truth?” (Asad 1993, 33).

###

In the first section of this paper, I clarify my theoretical approach and background. In the second, I examine the *body of Christ* metaphors, asking how clergy and laity perform and employ them. What are Catholics eating and how does it affect them? Third, I put the metaphors in the context of their conscious and less-conscious histories. Finally, I argue the discourse is morally charged, deployed, and performed especially in discussions of abortion and reproductive technologies. In these contexts, a pervasive moral argument draws on notions of personhood and the ripple effects of decision-making. The language of clergy and lay in these cases moves beyond establishing piety – becoming an outlet establishing both power and identity.

For over a year of research, I have tried to become fluent in the religious language and inhabit it as a field site. Like Harding, I have placed direct spoken or textual quotes in italics, using quotation marks only for outside phrases or texts.¹⁴ I hope this will allow transference into expression of both deeply personal religiosity, as well as wide institutional domain over ears, mouths, and bodies.

¹⁴ Harding uses this technique to great effect (Harding 2000, xii).

Part One: Situating Myself

I started going to St. Bede in fall 2008, to the five o'clock mass on Saturdays, as the sun spread low shadows into the sanctuary. Sometimes I'd go on Sunday morning at nine or eleven. My visits for the first few months were routine, with little personal contact or insight into the minds of the people in the pews around me. As my project became more serious, I started attending weekly Bible studies and Catholic Campus Ministry student discussion groups in the attic of a college dorm. I also interviewed a number of Catholics outside of the groups.

I consider myself a sensitive agnostic who takes the religious experiences of others seriously. I was baptized Catholic but raised in the Lutheran church until my family moved to Virginia at the age of 12. My grandmother, a Catholic convert, maintained a strong Catholic identity throughout her adulthood. Before moving, I would often play in her dusty apartment amid statues of Saint Anthony and the Blessed Virgin, watched over by paintings of the Sacred Heart.

With a muddled religious background (so no clear answer when I am asked), I have struggled to define myself as insider and outsider to the American Christian story – a struggle to learn the Williamsburg Catholic vernacular without converting. Luckily, I was met with support from most of the parishioners I met and given a relatively friendly welcome from the clergy.

Father Abe is somewhat new to the parish, having spent only four years at St. Bede. He majored in business and economics at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and decided to pursue the priesthood instead of getting an MBA, which he also considered seriously. He is from Virginia and after seminary at Catholic University in Washington,

D.C., decided to join the Richmond Diocese, and was sent to Williamsburg. This was his 25th year in the priesthood.

Until recently, another priest, Father Rob Cole, was serving in a secondary capacity at St. Bede, preparing to lead his own congregation. In May 2009, he was assigned to another parish.¹⁵ Other priests visit, and at least one retired priest, Father French, helps regularly at mass.

From its beginning, Williamsburg was an Episcopalian town. According to Father Abe, it wasn't until the early 20th century that Benedictine priests made regular trips from Richmond to say mass. The parish was established in 1932 next to the College of William and Mary as the Catholic Campus Ministry (CCM). It eventually branched off and became St. Bede, though it remained centered around the CCM chapel and the parish house near campus until 2003, when a new church was built on 43 acres across town. The new, massive church has a circular sanctuary that seats, at max, 1,591 people. The parish house still holds many church offices – and more space for services and Bible studies.

The parish has a large staff of paid and volunteer positions, including a parish nurse and a deacon. Deacon Dominic Cerrato has a Bachelor's in theology from Franciscan University, a Master's in theology¹⁶ from Duquesne University and a Doctorate from the Graduate Theological Foundation. Besides his titles as deacon and “Director of Adult Faith Formation” at St. Bede, he also runs a company, Cercorp, marketing a mortarless brick he invented and patented. “Deacon Dom” also teaches religion classes at a local Virginia community college and has a family of seven, who live

¹⁵ I heard, from various sources, that his reassignment was a political tactic by Father Abe. Though I find these politics interesting, I don't know much about them. However, I can note that the names of various clergy differ among parishioners: Father Abe, Father French, Father Rob, Father Jim (from Yorktown), and Deacon Dominic or Deacon Dom.

¹⁶ His Master's thesis is titled “Human Dignity: Its emergence and development in the Roman Catholic social tradition (1891-1965)” (Cerrato 1991). I haven't been able to locate his PhD dissertation.

in Ohio. He is not ordained as a priest, but at church functions wears the collar of the clergy. I quickly scribbled an all-too-true note to myself one day, that Deacon Dom is a salesman of sorts. He serves as a sort of public relations officer; I was often told *Deacon Dom could give you more information on that. He has the correct answers.* He did generously give me time, patience, and a copy of the Catechism.

###

Looking at Catholic experience through language is necessarily a look at relationships and power. Linguistic anthropologists recognize the possibility that sometimes “chunks of discourse come to be extractable from particular contexts and thereby made portable” (Keane 2007, 14). These chunks can circulate and be appropriated and re-appropriated by users – which might be problematic to authorities in traditions with institutionalized hierarchy.

Moral turmoil may accompany the chunk as it passes around a community. Keane notes a similar process to that at St. Bede, where “decontextualization of language can reinforce authority by offering it an apparently transcendental position from which to speak.” Or, “conversely, decontextualization can put the sources, intentions, or sincerity of a stretch of discourse in doubt, undermining those who would use it” (Keane 2007, 15).

This draws the question of a speaker’s intentionality into the picture. Theorists have suggested that the ritual aspect of these chunks suppresses individual intentionality, allowing “a collaborative authorship and interpretation.” Because of the variety of participant roles in using the language, authority – human or divine – can be collectively established or undermined (Keane 1997, 57). For example, *God bless you* at Bible study

can strengthen or undermine one's status in the group depending on the situation, though the intentionality of that phrase itself is not easily apparent.

This understanding begs for an explanation of agency and action. How does communal language constitute a person and their will? How does communal language inform human action? These are complex questions. Ultimately, I do not see language as purely regimenting voice, body, and subjective states; nor it is simply authoritatively restrictive of what can be said. Instead it seems "persuasive in part because ... at multiple linguistic levels, [it] serves as a metapragmatic figure for the accomplishment of the successive stages of the action being undertaken" (Keane 1997, 54). Importantly, this reflexive approach offers an understanding of the effects of the language on the consciousness of those who speak and hear it (Keane 1997, 55).

If each chunk of religious language is a metapragmatic figure for action, then a community's entire system would be a "language ideology."¹⁷ Keane argues that speakers within a language ideology (1) make object-chunks within the discourse, (2) are only partially aware of the uses of those chunks, and (3) use those chunks as "a causal role within the historical transformation of language itself" (Keane 2007, 17). The metaphors I heard are not so much rhetorical flourishes as they are objects for creative use in what Keane calls a larger "representational economy" (Keane 2007, 19).

Harding (2000) argues in the same vein. She writes about fundamentalist preachers who use Bible-based language as a flexible resource to evoke parallels between their positions and Biblical ones, enhancing religiosity and spurring political action among followers. These typological parallels create a "narrative economy" (Harding

¹⁷ Keane defines language ideologies as "culturally specific assumptions about the relations between language form and function" (1997, 57).

2000, 55). Furthermore, preachers often keep some “semantic risk or ambiguity, some sort of excess or gap that demands interpretive attention and engagement... an anomaly that incites the imagination” in their sermons (Harding 2000, 85). From individuals, such gaps demand inspired parallels and active commitment to personal interpretation.¹⁸

Throughout this paper, I follow both Harding (2000) and Keane (2007), watching for language as flexible authority using parallels and gaps, and as chunks of “semiotic ideology” that are treated like objects and deployed in right and wrong ways.

There is some awareness among Catholics that food/body metaphors and other chunks are recalled and recycled – they are after all vehicles to piety. But in each performance, the individual is resituating the words and adding their own layer of meaning – their own translation. The clergy’s language is being usefully and creatively applied by Catholic parishioners – but that does not necessarily mean it transforms to resist the clergy’s authority. Saba Mahmood makes the case that “agentival capacity is entailed not only in those acts that result in (progressive) change but also those that aim toward continuity, stasis, and stability” (2002, 212).

My paper deals with the deployment of discourse onto female bodies. It is important for me to note up front that, like Mahmood, I do not take agency to be the success or failure to disrupt norms, but rather the “cumulative character of reiterated performances in the material formation of the embodied subject” (Mahmood 2002, 216).

¹⁸ Of course, Jerry Falwell and his followers are Evangelical Protestants and Father Abe and his followers are most certainly not. There are obvious, important differences between the two movements **and** their language. I appeal to Harding’s theory of religious language as a theory, though I acknowledge the distant cousin relation between St. Bede Catholic Church and Thomas Road Baptist Church. The relationship between the two, however, may be closer than first appears. A few Catholics I met, including Sue and Gary, had converted from Protestant traditions. Also, the fact that Harding’s analysis can be to some extent applied to Virginian Catholics may mean some sort or degree of convergence.

While parishioners can and do resist St. Bede authorities, this resistance is neither fixed nor necessary.

Furthermore, I hope to address the means by which Catholicism reproduces itself. Asad discusses systematicity in regards to capitalism: the goals are to “change aggregate human conditions (distributions, trends, etc.) that are profitable or useful... Its systematicity lies, therefore, in probabilities, not causalities” (Asad 1993, 7). The notion can translate to a religious linguistic economy. Starting with authorized theology, believers exchange chunks of discourse to build piety – within a system that makes probable that same exchange and authorization. I ask, as Asad does, how religious power creates religious truth.

Part Two: Eating

Wafers transformed into body start as just wafers – symbolizing unleavened bread. Feeley-Harnik (1981, 125) suggests the unleavened food, not ripe for harvest, symbolizes a promise for future abundance. Catherine, a student, explained to me that *the bread doesn't have yeast because of the Passover story. But it's strange to find churches that use actual bread instead of wafers.* Most importantly, Catherine told me, *consecration can only happen in the context of a mass. There must be a congregation, a priest, and certain prayers.*

In performing the sacrament of the Eucharist in mass, Father Abe and the clergy of St. Bede set the meanings of the metaphors. The relationship between earthly and divine in the transubstantiation informs the *body of Christ* in every way, and Father Abe is the main arbiter of the miraculous exchange at mass.

In the Sacristy, a small room off the main hallway, next to the sanctuary, there is a sink, a set of cabinets, and a collection of unconsecrated wafers. A note hangs on a cabinet, asking for *quiet before the service, as the priests prepare, and after, because Christ is still present as they purify the vessels.* Already-transubstantiated body wafers (leftover from a previous mass) are located in the sanctuary, in a small, glassed-in chapel to one side. It is locked within a tabernacle there, with a special key kept in a special place.¹⁹ The tabernacle is surrounded by chairs and quiet, available for adoration.²⁰

In the service, on weekends, the mass builds from the Old Testament readings (two, read aloud by parishioners), the Gospel reading, and the homily given by a priest or

¹⁹ The practice of locking the body in the tabernacle is not new. The Fourth Council of the Lateran in 1215 decreed, the Host should be locked away *so that no audacious hand can reach them to do anything horrible or impious* (Fourth Council of the Lateran 1215, 20). For the same reasons probably, the Catholics who showed me where the St. Bede tabernacle key is kept were very uncomfortable.

²⁰ A “monstrance” is also a device for adoration of the consecrated body.

deacon. On regular days (non-holidays), this leads directly to the transformation of the wafers. Parishioners bring the wafers and wine to the front and the sacrament begins.

The ritual has changed dramatically in the past 50 years. People of my mother's generation remember the elderly priests praying over the altar in mumbled Latin. Before the 1960's, the laity only had pictures and explanations in their catechisms to explain priests' movements.²¹ These days, the altar is felt to be more accessible. The language is English, the altar is in the very center of the circular room, and, because of the microphone system, it is hoped that nobody is left out of the sacrament.

While ushers circulate the offering plates, the parochial vicar starts to prepare the altar as he would a dinner table. The vicar is an elderly man dressed in the same white robes as the three child-acolytes. The preparation starts at a side table, where a prayer book and chalices are located before and after mass.

As Father Abe walks to the front of the altar (though a front is difficult to distinguish in a circular sanctuary), facing his congregation, the vicar and acolytes lead 10 adult parishioners carrying chalices of wafers down the main aisle. Abe hands each chalice to the vicar, who sets it on the altar. The parishioners disperse.

While the faithful organ (or choir) plays on, Father Abe goes to the back of the altar and an acolyte brings him a small cup. The father pours from the vessel, into a larger chalice and sends the acolyte back to the side table and vicar.

Raising his arms, Father Abe sings a responsorial prayer about giving thanks. There are probably 18 silver vessels on the altar in front of him. *Hosanna in the highest*, Abe sings. The vicar and parishioners kneel.

²¹ Orsi 2005, chap. 4 offers more about changes to many American Catholic churches after the Second Vatican Council.

At this point, the story of the Last Supper is reenacted by Father Abe. The vicar, kneeling on a little cushion only a few feet from the altar, rings a bell at certain points in the story. First, as the bread (wafer) is broken. *Take this all and eat it in memory of me.* More bells. Father Abe raises the large wafer, then sets it down and bows.

At the end of the supper, Jesus took the cup. Father Abe holds a chalice. *Take this all and drink it in memory of me.* He raises the cup, the vicar rings the bells. Father Abe bows deeply. The wafer and wine is body and blood.

Let us proclaim the mystery of faith, the congregation sings, still kneeling. Father Abe prays for *Pope Benedict, Frances the Bishop, all the clergy, all our brothers and sisters, all the departed, all the saints, and Mary.* All stand and join hands for the Our Father. Then, with the body and blood sitting on the altar, parishioners *share the peace,* shaking hands, smiling, nodding.

During the next song, a woman brings the remaining Host from the tabernacle. As the song ends, Abe bows and the congregation kneels again. The priest raises the body and blood, holding in one hand a chalice, over the chalice in the other hand he holds a piece of the body. He eats this (chews it), drinks from the chalice, and bows deeply.

From there, the communion spreads out to the congregation; the vicar and organist (or choir) partake, the acolytes and other “Eucharistic ministers” (parishioner helpers) partake. One acolyte leads about 22 parishioner helpers down the main aisle, who partake of the Host and fan out with full chalices. Lines form, ushers usher, and the congregation is fed.

After communion, the priest consolidates the leftovers. Helpers take the vessels and wine back to the Sacristy and the transubstantiated wafers to the tabernacle. In all,

about 41 parishioners were involved in helping Father Abe, and almost all present in the sanctuary partook of the meal.²²

###

On Ash Wednesday, I sat in a circle for a small group discussion of CCM students. Five of us were there that evening, and we reflected on the meaning of the Eucharist. Among us was one Protestant, Shaun, a potential convert. Our ensuing discussion gave me insight into the meaning of Host as food and as body for these non-clergy believers.

The real presence is crucial. That Jesus is really present *in a more metaphysical way*, is what holds meaning and keeps believers coming back. Agreement among the group was that Protestants like Shaun *can spend a few minutes reflecting on Jesus dying for our sins*, but the more mystical Catholic metaphysics of transubstantiation is true participation.

The verb Jesus uses isn't 'to eat,' but 'to tear,' Matt told us. You aren't simply taking the Host, you're partaking of it. Mass is a community meal, with emphasis on the body. Later, in an interview at her house, Sue explained to me, *If you receive him in body, you've technically received him in blood too. Both are very effective... But it's more effective if you receive both species, for a deeper sense of experiencing the Lord and the blood He shed.* At mass, ushers point parishioners into long lines and afterwards many people duck out to leave early. The meaning is cast collectively up onto the altar, consecrated by the movements and music of the priest, and then distributed to each

²² I kneeled and sometimes sang the songs during the sacrament, but I never partook of the Host by receiving communion.

individual. It is ingested as grace and ties the community through identity and shared experience.²³ Nobody leaves **before** communion.

At the CCM meeting, we agreed that to force someone to eat the Host is *really bad, very disrespectful*. Catherine shook her head admonishingly. *Just taking it for fun diminishes the sacredness for everyone else. For someone to grab the body of Christ and walk away, it breaks the body of Christ of the moment, the community*. The community as body mutually establishes the bread as body. Disrespecting the wafer amounts to disrespecting the gathering. You can, therefore, judge someone's piety by the way they respect and talk about the Host. This also entails a respect of the clergy as enablers of community-body and bread-body. *Even though the priests are really boring, the Eucharist is **it*** (Matt).

Airing doubt and countering it is a careful linguistic duet, as I saw between Matt and Catherine. Matt said, *The real presence comes down to individual experience. There's something personally missing for me in the Protestant services*. Becoming tenser, he distanced his own piety from the conversation and stated a paradox. *But there is an intellectual argument. The Bible says transubstantiation is not a metaphor. But most Catholics don't think the Bible should be taken literally*. This reveals Matt's struggle with real presence as a modernist one.²⁴ Body and blood (Matt's *metaphors*) are mystical, yet fundamental to modern Catholic identity. Though not claimed as explicitly his own, Matt's doubts are threatening. Real presence is the main difference between Matt and Protestant Shaun, sitting beside him. *People **leave** Jesus because of this. Do we interpret the Bible literally or is it a metaphor?*

²³ Durkheim would like this analogy. He wrote of food-based rites, "Man used the animal's flesh for the purpose of remaking his own substance" (Durkheim 1912, 391).

²⁴ As discussed previously, the impossible-seeming cohabitation of mystical and secular worlds

Catherine, the group leader, speaks up to clarify and realign the conversation toward the real presence, stalling controversy. To do this, she uses the coded language and complicates Matt's use of the word *metaphor*. She mentions the parallel stories of Jesus' crucifixion and his foretelling of the destruction and rebuilding of the temple (John 2:19). *Jesus speaks metaphorically [about the temple's destruction and his own]. We believe it is now literal. His metaphors in the past in the Bible are literal now.* In this way, Catherine reiterates the doctrine in her own words – crucifixion and its reenactment at mass define and make real presence. Back at the basics, the problem of modernity and threat of secularization is diverted. Catherine can and does encounter Christ.

###

Body is an ambiguous word, an advantage for Catholic metaphors. *Body* can be community or individual. Since the Eucharist defines both meanings in one demonstration, they are inextricably linked; any talk of one can be talk of the other. For many devout, to experience this multiplicity of metaphors is to experience the ubiquity of God.

A relationship is established at mass by a collection of people that is never the same at any given ceremony – but one that **seems** the same and is said to **be** the same congregation. The Eucharist explicitly authorizes Catholic relationships to other Catholics – and personal relationships with God – through ingesting the *bread of angels* and divine blood.

The body of Jesus, as bread on the altar-table, is nourishing to the body of his people. Jesus is both priest and victim, the fulfillment of numerous paralleled stories of the Old Testament. As the “necromantic mediator,” the priest at the altar brings back to

life the body and blood; “the Redeemer dies again mystically without really dying, at once alive and as if murdered” (Camporesi 1989, 225). As Camporesi notes, the causal order is tampered with, the qualities of bread and wine are altered by divine will. The real presence on the altar is the necessary bond to unite all parts of the *body of Christ* into one, to bring all members of the family to the same table.

There is another upset in the causal order as parishioners consume and digest body and blood. Regular food is changed by the eater and **incorporated** into the eater’s body; divine food, on the other hand, **transforms the eater**. “It does not change. Rather, it changes us” (Camporesi 1989, 227). Catholics are not “cannibals” – not because they eat only bread and drink only wine, but because they are eating neither food nor body, but a combination that transcends both. *God is like manna from Heaven. Jesus is what we call the living bread* (Matt).

When I asked about *body*, parishioners loved to point me back to Bible verses, especially 1 Corinthians 12:

As a body is one though it has many parts, and all the parts of the body, though many, are one body, so also Christ. For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit. Now the body is not a single part, but many. If a foot should say, ‘Because I am not a hand I do not belong to the body,’ it does not for this reason belong any less to the body. ... As it is, God placed the parts, each one of them, in the body as he intended. If they were all one part, where would the body be? But as it is, there are many parts, yet one body... If one part suffers, all the parts suffer with it; if one part is honored, all the parts share its joy (1 Corinth 12:12-26).

Believer is to church as body part is to body. This analogy gives birth to infinite metaphorical possibilities – beautiful, creative, insightful expressions of a relationship to the community and to God. Even better, it authorizes the person who knows it as

distinctly Catholic. It gives the individual a role, as a hand or foot, in helping the organized and hierarchical body, with Christ, priest of priests, as head.

God could find other people to fill the roles I fill, Beth told me. There's something unique about the way I accomplish my part in the collective whole.

###

To some parishioners, this discourse is comforting and inclusive. To others, it is not. When one part of the body doesn't work, the whole body can't function properly. This metaphor can be read two ways. Malfunctioning parts – Catholics gone astray, the sick, the distressed – can be condemned. But on the flip side of the metaphor, sometimes malfunctions mysteriously occur outside of direct control, like scandals among the clergy (human error) or sickness among the innocent (blessing).

Condemnation of a malfunctioning person carries a powerful moral imperative. Catholics must align with doctrine when making decisions, to avoid or remedy spiritual and bodily sicknesses and keep up their end of the collective bargain. The threat is very real because the body and soul are linked. *The body is not accidental, but is an expression of the soul* (Deacon Dominic). Action taken by the soul – sin or piety – marks the physical body. Thus, sick bodies are the expression of sick souls, and sick souls have the potential to destroy healthy bodies. Like God, condemnation is both understanding and dominating.

One night in a CCM discussion, a recent convert, Stephen, noted that when one person doesn't act their proper role, the *detriment is systematic and comes back to us because we're acting out of harmony with God's will*. Beth tried to rephrase it for him,

We're all part of everyone, so sin has a negative impact on the whole body – everyone ... or at least everyone in the church.

Sin, as Beth described it, is a *rupture in the relationship* of a person to God, which *throws off the balance of the church and God*. Deacon Dominic verified this metaphor, *By revealing himself to us, God establishes a relationship and defines our sense of self*. Sin is personal and communal, spiritual and physical. Obedience to God, through obedience to the church, is the only way to stay healthy, pure, and safe. The metaphor of malfunction is deployed to teach this lesson.

The metaphor's condemnation contributes to the discourse of power that dominates – and has historically dominated – lives of Catholic “cripples.” Orsi (2005) discusses the discourse and its effects in America in the latter half of the 20th century. Devotional literature and the Catholic culture surrounding the ill, Orsi shows, was saturated with the directive to “wear sickness becomingly... [to] put a blue ribbon bow on your bedjacket and smile,” in an attempt to disappear anything wrong in the body of the church, meaning to disappear anything wrong in the bodies of the distressed.²⁵ Though I didn't hear as much of this discourse aimed at the sick as Orsi claims flooded devotional literature, I did hear echoes.

On the flip side, there is salvation to be had from wounds in the body. People who are blessed by sickness have expected wounds of salvation and redemption, paralleled to the saving wounds of Christ. *The body of Christ without wounds is not the body of Christ* (Deacon Dominic). Cripples' pain might even be used to enhance the religious position of others in the body of the church, since pain can be interpreted as a “gift” from God. “Pain

²⁵ From a 1950 devotional article. Katherine Neuhaus Haffner, “One Day At A Time,” *Ave Maria* 72 (9 September 1950), 343. Quoted in Orsi 2005, 27.

was alienable: coined from the bodies of the (untrustworthy) sick, it could be taken away and applied to the welfare of the health in a redistributive economy of distress” (Orsi 2005, 29). Orsi remarks that a case of this sort of redistribution lay in the idea that a “shut-in” with a crucifix and a set of prayers “can release an untold number of souls from purgatory. Stuck within their own rooms, cripples get to be the liberators of the dead” (Orsi 2005, 44).

Likewise, condemnation might not always be the next step for the physically healthy, spiritually sick malfunctioning parts. Take for example the American clergy’s problematic sex abuse scandals. Priest abusers – *rotten eggs in the clergy* (Father Abe) – and their sins can be neutralized by their expectedness. The *priests in jail who have screwed up* are fallible people in the church (Deacon Dominic). In this way, they become proof of human error, expected human wounds. *Some Catholics are good, some are bad. Some are Christians only in appearance* (Charlie). *It’s a good thing the scandals were revealed. The breach of trust is profound... We have to try to let the Lord work through us, and things will be cleansed* (Sue).

Just as sin symbolizes threat to the community relationships, so the Eucharist symbolizes stability. *Communion is a commitment to Jesus and the Catholic Church. This is why we don’t share it [with Protestants or non-Christians]. For example, I don’t let everyone or anyone else kiss my wife* (Deacon Dom).

How can we become a more unified body? How do we make the body of Christ more cohesive and cooperative? Unlike a deacon or priest, group leader Catherine extends the body metaphor, asking what we can do to avoid *the rupture sin causes in the body of Christ*.

Stephen suggests, *A conscious effort that other people have friends and food will help the body of Christ. If you're lacking in a basic bodily thing like food, you're weakened by that lack and sin can enter more easily.* The ideal place is a well-fed community. Liz turned the question outward, *It helps me to see people at mass. I find inspiration in their joy... It's like spiritual ADD. If I'm not with people it's easy for me not to focus.* So, more attendance at mass and breaking of the bread would mean reaching that ideal, the well-fed community, in another sense.

###

Truth bridges the divide between the clergy and the laity. *The church proposes the truth. She does not impose it. The cop outside on Sunday isn't holding a gun to traffic. To force divine love on anyone would be divine rape* (Deacon Dominic). And again, from a parishioner, *The Holy Spirit is a great gentleman. He doesn't push us. We shouldn't worry* (Barbara).

The Pope epitomizes both bureaucracy and faith. On April 17, 2008, I was at Catholic University in Washington, D.C., working as a journalist covering Pope Benedict's visit. My experience there speaks to the paralleled power and religious truth both Pope and clergy embody.

The Pope was making an afternoon drive in the Pope-mobile to the university to meet with American Catholic leaders, from just having celebrated mass at the baseball stadium. Students gathered on the lawn of the school to celebrate, and the American clergy arrived in their regalia. A fence separated us (students, journalists, the public) from the arriving clergy and, as the visit drew nearer, people accumulated along the fence to wave or reach out and touch the robes of arriving priests, bishops, and cardinals. Almost

a year later, I learned Father Abe was one of the priests who walked past the fence that day. Men training to be part of the Dominican order, in gowns on my side of the fence, could name most of the passing clergy.

Using my press pass, I went to a nearly-abandoned press room,²⁶ and then to a field where thousands of people waited behind barricades to see the Pope simply drive by, passing time with exuberant songs. There was a myriad of guitars, drums, and people praying and dancing. The energy and expectancy was exhilarating. Shirts, banners, and flags all proclaimed welcome to the Pope, a mortal connected directly to God.

As he passed in the car, I saw the top of his head through the plexiglass – but I was more fascinated by the children sitting on their relatives' shoulders, the people running along behind the crowds to keep up with the car, the velocity of the guitars and shouts, and the grown men frantically scrambling up the trees around me.

The division between hierarchy and laity in a context like this, and at mass too, is very noticeable. Access to the divine – that is, performance of truth and power – creates the separation, the fence, between them. Yet there is an obvious need for interaction from both sides, given their mutual necessity. The interaction is laced with the fragility of authentication – priests and clergy verifying their divine access, and parishioners offering their respect and piety. The use of safe metaphors betrays these motives.

Back in Williamsburg, I heard from various parishioners that a good priest is one who can make a message applicable to people – a good translator. Tom told me *a priest should be a manager and not a mini-God-type boss*. In February, Father Rob presided over a funeral for a family member. *He called me before the funeral to ask about her*

²⁶ In the press room, there were unlimited free snacks and bottled ice water. A study on the media politics of the Pope's visit would be an interesting one.

background. He was good at listening. At the funeral, he said a few words that spoke volumes. It just wasn't rehearsed, which meant a lot to me. More than Father Abe, Father Rob is able to bring the message home to Tom because he's not behind the pulpit. He walks around, and talks about "the God of TV" and things like that. The message is more understood when mingled in with society.

Part Three: Faith-History and the Bible

Whoever gets to tell the story has great influence in setting the meanings of the discourse. Power that creates truth is often emergent from power that vocalizes a history.

The language of presence is informed by history, or rather, histories.²⁷ There are “objective” historical facts about Catholicism and St. Bede Parish. There are statistics, maps, and church documents. This history takes a certain type of faith (a modernist one) and a certain type of authority to construct, following cause and effect through time. From before Jesus’ birth, through the archeo-historical record more than 2,000 years, until the time of the Richmond Diocese and St. Bede’s construction – this history is one of infinite subtleties and scholarly debate. History in this sense impacts the parishioners at St. Bede by situating them, not necessarily consciously. This is history with a lowercase ‘h.’

People are situated by history, but they also situate History. St. Bede is imbued with what I call a faith-History. The History they make, the one that takes their unique religious faith, is singular to their community; it is the story parishioners tell to establish and judge their reality.

But parishioners don’t just make this stuff up. They look to the clergy to authorize their History and answer their doubts. They point explicitly. *Go ask Deacon Dom, he probably knows that for sure* (Gary). *We should ask someone who knows, like Father Jim* (Beth). *Deacon Dom could tell you the authentic way it works* (Sue). And their pointing is implied in their language. *We are all the body of Christ* (Julie). *It is the mystery of faith*

²⁷ Denning (1995) uses uppercase H and lowercase h to distinguish conscious and less-conscious histories. “Let me call these pasts suffusing our presents in this transformed, translated, encapsulated way, History.... history is something different... History is all the ways we encode the past in symbol form to make a present” (Denning 1995, 14). Additionally, Trouillot (1995) acknowledges the production of history as well as its silences. “Human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators” (Trouillot 1995, 2).

(Gary). *We should ask St. Peter when we get to Heaven* (Sue). *This might be wrong, but I think Mary was probably in a lot of pain giving birth* (Laura). *What does that word even mean?* (Bill)

Defining Jesus and the saints' personal faith-Historical feelings, bodily and spiritually, is crucial to Catholic understanding of presence. One way to earn this faith-History is to focus on *the living word* in Bible studies, which are organized and led by two couples with the blessings of Father Abe and Deacon Dom.

Typological parallels and filling in the gaps²⁸ are the proper way to read or discuss the Bible. The language of the book is permeating and permeable in Catholic discourse. Since the body and food are uniquely interdependent, the *word made flesh* is also the *word made food*. Sue tells parishioners, *We shouldn't be afraid to use the Bible and feed on the word of God. Jesus is present and he's feeding us as we use it each day*. Another time she tells me, *The scriptures come in, past the ears, down into the heart*.

Some traditions don't hold the gospel up the way we do, with the gold book, Sue explained. She was referring to the gospels that are carried to the altar by a parishioner at the beginning of each mass. The book is bright gold with an image of the crucified Christ on the front. It is set on the altar until later, when the priest or deacon carries it, led by candle-bearing acolytes, to the lectern to be read. In a way, the golden gospel prepares both altar and worshipers for the coming miracle; before Catholics consume and digest the body, they consume and digest the gospel. *The Lord feeds us with Eucharist and knowledge translates into our hearts. We preach the gospel through our acts* (Sue).

An especially dominant parallel in our Bible study discussions has been between Old Testament stories of exodus and manna in the desert and the passion and

²⁸ Ideas I borrow from Harding 2000.

resurrection; Jesus is manna, food from God.²⁹ There are other prominent typological paralleling stories that involve miraculous food – like the multiplying of loaves and fish to feed thousands, a sign of the Christian future.

The faith-History includes constructions of Jesus the person and events of his time that other histories differ with; sometimes Jesus’ very personality differs by context. St. Bede interpretations unfailingly attempt to connect Williamsburg Catholics to **their** divine Christian past and fill in the gaps.

###

Metaphors cannot be dissected on their own, but only within a constructed faith-History. *Body of Christ* talk is only one part of the entire Catholic representational economy.³⁰ So the meaning question becomes one of production: how is the food and body made? What faith-Historical devices produce the grace in the wafers Catholics eat – and thereby the metaphors they talk in?

The “delicate moment of transubstantiation” (Camporesi 1989, 224) is a high-risk instant. *The stakes are high. If we’re wrong about real presence, then adoration is idolatry and it’s just bread. The Eucharist is the gamble. We won’t know until we die* (Matt).

Gillian Feeley-Harnik (1981) provides an anthropological history of Jesus’ food, passed down through time, situating and inflecting today’s discourse. “Gastronomy is geography; foods are intimately linked to the place-times of their growing, making, and eating” (Feeley-Harnik, xvi). Pieces of the history of Christian food are used consciously

²⁹ Feeley-Harnik (1981) writes about the history of this connection, which I will discuss later.

³⁰ Keane describes representational economy: “the practices and associated ideologies exist in dynamic relations with one another such that changes in one domain can have consequences for others.” The idea is meant to “situate words, things, and persons (along with other agentive beings such as spirits) dynamically within the same world with one another” (Keane 2007, 18-19).

in St. Bede faith-History constructions, while others are more silent. The divine food on *the Lord's table* was originally created at the Last Supper, crucifixion, and Passover events – all paralleled to contemporary Eucharistic sacraments.

As Christianity developed out of Jewish traditions, meals symbolized correct behavior among social groups in relation to God (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 2). Religious dietary rules were “conceived, manipulated, and transformed” for political, social, and religious reasons (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 18). The paralleled events of Passover, the Last Supper, and crucifixion each mark a *recurring covenant between God and mankind* (Deacon Dominic) characterized by sacrifice. In fact, the parallels are set clearly in the stories – the Last Supper was originally a Passover seder (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 112).³¹

Jewish Passover was a “feast that celebrates kinship and nationhood,” memorializing the Israelites’ escape from Egypt (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 19). The new Passover covenant established by Jesus Christ marked a major turning point in the community, evidenced by a new idea of food. “Early Christians used the language of food to establish the legitimacy of Jesus,” but “every critical element in the Passover is reversed: the time, the place, the community, the sacrifice, and ultimately the significance of the meal... Jesus’ sacrifice symbolizes the death of family and polity. His new covenant includes all humanity” (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 19).

Eating with gentiles was polluting to Jews who had strict standards of what and how to eat, particularly in regards to meat and blood (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 44). The inclusion of gentiles at the table was the beginning of a new type of community. Thus, the gospels also shift, establishing a radical *new commandment to love one another* (John

³¹ There is debate over the dating of the crucifixion and Last Supper. The gospel of John stands out – John writes that the Last Supper was eaten *before* Passover. This means Jesus was hanging on the cross while lambs were slaughtered in the temple *for* Passover. However, the synoptic gospels seem to agree that the crucifixion happened *later* than John suggests (Frontline; Feeley-Harnik 1981, 118).

13:34). Traditionally, a neighbor could be a worst enemy, as in the parable of the Good Samaritan – but Jesus changes that (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 52-53).

Jesus also asked for stability in his new religious-political community, as recorded in Galatians, in the language of food. *You shall love your neighbor as yourself. But if you go on biting and devouring one another, beware that you are not consumed by one another* (Galatians 5:14-15). One body, and peace, was established between Jews and gentiles (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 54). Similar equality-talk among Christians, invoking the Pauline letters that preach tolerance, surfaces often at St. Bede, reminding parishioners *to love our Protestant brothers and sisters*.³² On October 20, 2009, the Pope astoundingly invited Anglicans to rejoin the church, saying the church would allow them to maintain some of their own practices, even conceding the rite of ordination to married Anglican priests (Donadio and Goodstein 2009).

Feeley-Harnik suggests that early Christian liturgical reference to the Last Supper was always parenthetical, a sign that “the Christian prayer originated in a Jewish benediction over shared food” (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 64). Such was the importance of the meal. Introducing a ceremony of “drinking blood” to a tradition with strict prohibitions on blood assured Jesus’ shock factor across the Jewish world.³³ The rules against blood were in place because of the equation of blood with life, on both physical and spiritual levels. Feeley-Harnik cites the Jewish rituals in Deuteronomy (12:20-23), *You may eat*

³² The equality-talk has been silenced and put to different ends throughout the ages. It wasn’t until Vatican II (1960’s) that religious tolerance became official doctrine from Rome. The Declaration of Religious Freedom announced that all men have the right to religious freedom and the Ecumenical Decree pledged the Catholic Church to work towards Christian unity. Of course, it was also Vatican II that allowed other “secularizing” processes, including the use of vernacular languages for mass (Greene 1993, 7).

³³ Nock 1964, 125 quoted in Feeley-Harnik 1981, 64. Other scholars have argued for Jesus’ militant reputation or relative anonymity.

[flesh] at will, to your heart's desire... But make sure that you do not partake of the blood; for blood is life, and you shall not consume this seat of life with the flesh.

Jesus was talking in an already very established language. In Jewish scripture, summarized by Feeley-Harnik, the power of the Lord is manifested in his control over food. Relations with his people are directly tied to their acceptance or rejection of his food and culinary regulations (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 72). Furthermore, the word of God is embodied in food – thus, also embodied is his wisdom, partaking of which induces a sacred covenant, as in many Old Testament parallels (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 85). “As God’s word came to be concentrated in the law, so food law came to represent the whole law” (Feeley-Harnik 1981, 96).

This food history resurfaces at St. Bede as conscious faith-History and doctrine.³⁴ The Last Supper was a major topic of Bible study discussions, serving for parishioners as the setting to imagine apostles’ doubts and consequently settle their own. More than once, we talked about difficulties in *actually believing* the resurrection and the very first transubstantiation. *How did the apostles deal with a lack of proof – and how do we deal with it now?*³⁵ Sue’s answer: *Sometimes an answer to prayer is concrete, but not tangible. Those are questions I want to ask. We’ll have to save them up for when we get to Heaven.* Gary, another night, told me simply that *it’s the mystery of faith.*

Although Jesus used [a] figure of speech, they did not realize what he was trying to tell them (John 10:6). Jesus was radically beyond comprehension in his own time.

Parishioners know this through faith. Feeley-Harnik knows it through political history.

The gospels invoke both; faith emerges by appropriation of history.

³⁴ I do not mean to imply that Christian religious culture is static. The thread weaving St. Bede with the rest of Christian history, I believe, is doctrine that plays an important role in constructing parishioners’ conscious faith-Histories.

³⁵ A modernist cry for evidence, “proof.”

To Catholics today, the radical mystery of Jesus is the miracle and horror of the crucifixion and transubstantiation. The questions they ask are metaphysical and intimately connected to how they each face hardship, tragedy, and death. *How did Jesus rise bodily and spiritually? Why wasn't he a ghost?* The questions are framed in a dualism between heaven and earth, the immaterial and material.³⁶

Actual digestion of the Eucharist is especially mysterious. I asked parishioners how grace is transmitted, and was given metaphors and images. *It's a gift. The gift is like a present and until you open it you can't receive it* (Sue). *As you grow in your faith, you appreciate the gift. It becomes better and more real to you* (Charlie). *I don't think of the grace as a chemical property. Grace is lent to a person, to become more loving, more-Christ-like* (Stephen).

Grace can be consumed through text (language) and through food. Sue explains that *if you read scripture you will get faith. The Lord will speak to you and ... as the word works through us, He transforms us into Him. He is feeding us. Just like a baby needs food. The Eucharist and scripture come into our bodies physically and spiritually, to keep us safe.*

Interpretations of digestion of the Host have varied through time, but we can find inflections from medieval fascination with digestion and body-spirit interaction. Historical understandings are relevant to St. Bede because they are interpretations that live within Catholic doctrine, as a factor in faith-History. According to Piero Camporesi (1989), in the middle ages, the stomach was “a hidden altar where occult and

³⁶ Materiality is a complicated topic. It is bound up in issues of agency, power, language, and semiotics. In his introduction, Miller (2005) argues anthropology should abandon philosophic assumptions of material and immaterial and “return to the vulgarity of our relativism” in messy ethnography. Nonetheless, the dualism that permeates Catholic doctrine is nonetheless intimately connected to Western philosophy, itself a social artifact.

incomprehensible acts took place, a zone of liturgical mediation between Heaven and Earth, the divine and the beastly.” Even if it were vomited, the Host was worthy of adoration. Roman doctors theorized that the “assimilation of the species” took about one quarter of an hour for priests and about one minute less for laymen” (Camporesi 231-232).

Carolyn Walker Bynum adds that medieval food discourse regarded gluttony as lust, fasting as penance, and eating as a basic encounter of God. Food in medieval times was a marker of socio-economic standing; the frugality of the Eucharistic “banquet” was conspicuous consumption, a show of piety by self-denial (Bynum 2008, 121).

Notably, food miracles and visions – the Eucharist turning into honey, for example – occurred far more frequently to women. Between 1000 and 1700, women were 18 percent of those canonized as saints. Of those, 50 percent were revered for illness brought on by fasting and penitential practices. Bynum concludes that this and other evidence indicates that food practices were central to medieval female piety, and both genders associated food with women (Bynum 2008, 123).

This is undoubtedly emerging from the human/divine dualism in the Catholic language ideology. The Virgin Mary is the source of Jesus’ body and humanity, while God, his father, is the source of his divinity. Historically, humanity is woman and woman is food – nourishment, weakness, and dependence (Bynum 2008, 133).

The church personified has a feminine gender. *She is Christ’s bride* (Deacon Dominic). So, the *body of Christ* (the church) is female, just as the *body of Christ* (His body) is female, given by the Blessed Virgin. Just as in medieval times, the church is female “partly because the tender, nurturing aspect of God’s care for souls was regularly

described as motherly.” Margaret of Oingt (13th century) described Jesus’ pain on the cross as birth pangs; others compared Christ’s compassion to nursing at his breast (Bynum 1989, 176).

Looking at St. Bede, we find the birth pangs of Christ reenacted daily in mass by his offspring, the clergy. We do indeed see a “care for souls,” be it from Father Abe, Deacon Dominic, or leaders of Bible studies. The authority of the clergy is maternal, subservient in an obviously Western model only to *our Father who art in heaven*, whose words filter directly through mother. The church as earthly female body is the site of divine judgment and authority.

Mary and Eve’s parallel stories work within the male/spirit and female/body duality. *The knot of Eve’s disobedience was untied by Mary’s obedience: what the virgin Eve bound through her disbelief, Mary loosened by her faith* (St. Irenaeus qtd in Catechism, 136). In other words, Eve symbolizes the frailty of humanity and gluttonous flesh, while Mary redeems that symbol with obedience. The gendered division persists. *Death through Eve, life through Mary (Lumen gentium³⁷ qtd in Catechism, 136). She’s called the New Eve and Queen Mother. She’s blessed from behind [in previous history] and from further along the timeline* (Julie).

These dualities became very salient one night while discussing Jesus’ birth at Bible study. Sue clearly exercises her role as study leader, though the atmosphere of reverent contemplation allows for questions that would otherwise be inappropriate or unwelcome.

³⁷ A 1964 document, one of the main works of the Second Vatican Council, signed by Pope Paul VI.

Nancy: *Our Blessed Mother had no original sin, so she's giving birth without pain. But someone had to come help her through the problems of giving birth.*

Sue: *I always assumed that she had had pain. I understand scripture there. She was born without original sin.*

Nancy: *But that's not how it was meant to be. Because of Eve, she had no pain. Only, the angels made sure Jesus came out ok.*

Laura: *So much for privacy. [Pause] These are questions I want to ask.*

Sue: *That's right. We'll save up our questions for when we get to Heaven.*

[Laughter] *We can ask St. Peter.*

Julie: *How come in the nativity scene we only see men?*

Sue: *St. Francis gave us our nativity scene. It was his way of teaching.*

Nancy: *It's all St. Francis.*

Sue: *Next time, we can add girls in there.*

Nancy: *And then the question is where are you going to find those female statues?*

[Laughter]³⁸

In that interchange, we witness the gender duality in conflict – Mary is human but God is being born, so does she experience human-felt pain of childbirth? We also see words that exercise authority by pointing to God (*save up our questions*) or clergy (*St. Francis*). Underlying it are “modern” concerns (*so much for privacy*) that parallel the story to “modern” experiences (childbirth). Nancy’s last comment about the statues is her recognition of the dominant story of gender – at once cognizant and accepting.

³⁸ This dialogue happened Sept. 9, 2009. I am reconstructing it from my notes as best as possible.

Part Four: Talking about People

Body of Christ language evidences a religious domain over Catholic bodies authorized by church hierarchy. This domain becomes at the same time very personal, very communal, and very contested when people have to make choices about their bodies, potentially affecting other people – unborn, alive, and deceased – in their community. Catholic doctrine of personhood and choice hyper-moralizes the discourse.

All human relationships bestow a sense of identity. Deacon Dominic explained God to me one day in his office. He spoke in a clear doctrinal register, much of which I later found nearly word for word in the Catechism. God’s relationship to humans is fundamental. *He reaches down to reveal himself to man, and to reveal man to himself, to give each person an identity.* This argument authorizes the moral system and offers a personal imperative to each believer – to know oneself is to know God, and Christ’s passion is both linchpin guarantee and demand.

Under the appearance of bread and wine, there is *the whole of Christ, the body, blood and soul of Christ.* There is another special dualism in Deacon Dominic’s explanation – a person is the sum of the body and the soul, which are interactive but separate. The body is not accidental, instead is the *expression of the soul.* *God didn’t create a soul and slap a body on it.*

One’s identity in relation to the entire world is written in the soul and expressed by the body.³⁹ The soul is unique, too, in relation to everything else in the world. Gender, for example, is not something bodily or social; *gender is not something external, but is*

³⁹ I again point to the first chapter of Orsi 2005. Orsi reviews 20th century Catholic literature counseling “cripples” to wear their pain like a crown of thorns.

*ontological, part of our very being.*⁴⁰ The moral code is a metaphysical reality, asking believers to be who they are *sui generis* – who they ought to be and who it is written in their bodies and souls to be. *Being Jonna is something essentially part of your soul* (Deacon Dom).

Choices, too, reveal identity, because they alter divine and human relationships. *People who steal are thieves* (Deacon Dominic). Good choices lead to *fulfillment* and evil choices lead to *alienation*. *If we make the claim of being transformed by Jesus Christ and we don't make good choices, we're lying to ourselves* (Deacon Dominic). What this means is that there is free will to choose, but there are correct and incorrect choices, eternal heaven and eternal hell.

Keane labels this awareness of action “a reflexive understanding of agency,” generating “concepts of the kind of act being undertaken; that is, metapragmatic categories.” These metapragmatic categories of actions – the right and wrong choice delineations – are cultural constructs, tied to faith-History and discourse.

The metapragmatic category of agency helps organize relations among kinds of acts, of media, and of actors. It concerns such things as whether agency itself is a good or something to be subordinated to a higher good, such as tradition, the law, the good, or divine mandate (Keane 2007, 53).

Claiming divine access, the church decides what kinds of actions are good and what kinds are not.

A morality of soul-and-body persons capable of good-or-bad choices is seriously powerful. Take for example Father Abe's account of sin as sickness. *Like sickness, sin comes in greater and lesser degrees. If you have a temperature of 101 degrees, you might*

⁴⁰ In Deacon Dominic's exegesis of doctrine, homosexuality is understood as sickness, invoking the discourse of sickness once again. *Saying “God made homosexuals, so they must be good” is like saying “God made people with cancer, so cancer must be good.”* Fit into the logic of a binary gender system written into souls, this makes perfect sense.

*have venial, less serious sin. But if you're running a 105-degree fever, your brain is in danger of overheating, you could suffer death.*⁴¹ Deacon Dominic agrees, *The deepest kind of sickness is sin.* Naturally, the cure is located with the “doctor who could heal all infirmities,” in his listening ear waiting for confession and his healing food waiting for consumption (Camporesi 1989, 222).

It is only logical to bring the food to those who do not have it – to bring the choice of faith to the choiceless. This happens at St. Bede in a number of settings. Many sick Catholics are homebound, especially in Williamsburg, an area with a high ratio of seniors. The circumstances – missed confessions and communion – are dangerous, and the consequences are possibly eternal. In the early 1990's, a ministry sprang up at St. Bede, to take the Host to “shut-ins” in private homes, nursing homes, or area hospitals. Today this kind of ministry is not unusual in Catholic churches across the U.S.,⁴² but it is the first and only of its kind at St. Bede. The JOY ministry (“Jesus, Others, and You”) was started by Sister Berenice Eltz and 10-12 parishioners. Now, there are over 90 JOY ministers, all parishioner volunteers, who cater to around 140 people every week. *The Holy Spirit is so focused on this group!* (Anne)

A priest visits the shut-ins on the church list every six months to anoint them and hear confessions. But when the priest is too late to hear a last confession or administer extreme unction, having eaten the *body of Christ* can be of some consolation. A JOY minister is counseled to be brave in the face of death and has the *freedom to take the communion to any Catholic – a husband or neighbor, even.*⁴³

⁴¹ In all contexts, by clergy and parishioners alike, danger and safety were frequently referenced by name, even if Hell or Purgatory were not explicitly mentioned. The dangers of sin, cleanliness of the Host, and problems of sickness bring to mind Mary Douglas' work on the dichotomy of purity and danger (1966).

⁴² From conversations with parishioners.

⁴³ I quote a number of people as I talk about the JOY ministry. At first they only asked me to not use names. Later, they asked me not to attend any JOY ministry meetings or deliveries.

A *pyx* is a little gold or silver case, in which JOY ministers store the consecrated Host as they leave the sanctuary. During weekday services (9 a.m.), a minister places his *pyx* on a platter with unconsecrated host inside, and comes back after mass to retrieve it. Other times, the JOY minister can go directly to the tabernacle, open it, genuflect, and fill their *pyx*. Running errands is heavily discouraged while carrying a full *pyx*. (And a full *pyx* is a *pyx* with any amount of Host.) It is also helpful, I was told, for JOY ministers to wear a cross around their neck to show their status when they have Jesus with them.

There are JOY ministry guidelines, which speak briefly to the task of authenticating Catholics as ready to receive the Host. *It is your solemn responsibility to protect the Holy Eucharist from any possible type of unbelief or desecration. Occasionally, someone unknown to you will ask to receive the Holy Eucharist. You must determine if it is correct to do so.* With such delicate determinations in the hands of the laity, it seems obvious why JOY ministry leaders (after consulting with Father Abe, I was told) abruptly cut communications with me. On my one visit with JOY leaders, we met for mass. As I sat next to one of the JOY leaders, she took the initiative to whisper to me, *You know you can't go up and take communion.* She was just making sure I knew.

The bounty of the altar at St. Bede isn't limited to parishioners and shut-ins of Williamsburg. It also reaches into the Caribbean, to the bodies and lives of Haitians. Since 1987, St. Bede has been twinned with St. Joseph Parish in Thomonde, a village in central Haiti. U.S.-Haiti twinning programs, extensive enough to already merit attention from anthropologists,⁴⁴ pair Catholic churches across the U.S. to churches in Haiti, the oft-noted *poorest country in the Western hemisphere.*⁴⁵ (Everyone I ever mentioned Haiti

⁴⁴ Hefferan 2007

⁴⁵ According to the history provided by St. Bede, the Haiti twinning comes from a Richmond Diocese program initiated in 1983. That program is part of the larger "Haiti Parish Twinning Program" (HPTP) based in Nashville (St. Bede Catholic Church Website).

to cited this “fact.”) This creates a funneling system for American donations to Haiti and, most noticeably from the perspective of the average Virginian Catholic, it establishes needy Other bodies and souls to pray for – and possibly aid or visit.

The discourse of St. Bede is insistent that *Haitian brothers and sisters* have both bodily and spiritual needs. *They need our help to survive as a community of faith*, and donating to “Haiti Outreach” is a good way *to care for those who are most deprived* and will extend the *Father’s kingdom to the far ends of the earth*, as Jesus wished (Aug. 2009 newsletter).⁴⁶

In fact, body metaphors permeate St. Bede’s relationship with St. Joseph. The Thomonde parish, *struggling mightily to overcome the unbearable weight of a tragic history*, receives not only prayers and donations, but also visits from nurses affiliated with St. Bede and financial support specifically given for a *medical mission that is run by a competent local Haitian staff* (June, March 2009 newsletters). Father Abe told me in February that the Haiti Outreach program at St. Bede was planning to remodel and expand a building next to the St. Joseph Church in Thomonde, to make a clinic named after the Good Samaritan.

###

Morality works within discourse about sexuality and conception especially because the situations are, theologically by definition, dealing with more than one person, more than one life. Since the Virgin Mary provided the matter and God provided the soul, Jesus was made into a fully-human, fully-divine person. The body/soul pairing at the moment of conception falls in line with Aristotelian philosophy of reproduction – a

⁴⁶ The church newsletters I quote are distributed after every mass and are widely read. The articles are written by parishioners. Often, the Haiti Outreach articles are printed right beside the Parish Nurse Ministry articles, which help answer questions of eating right, proper exercise, and other health matters. I find this an interesting juxtaposition.

woman provides the matter and a man provides the spirit. Other religious philosophers take up the same argument. Galen theorized that the mother is an oven in which the fetus cooks. Thomas Aquinas wrote, “Female alone supplies the matter. So even if male semen were lacking in Christ’s conception it does not follow that the necessary matter was missing” (qtd in Bynum 1989, 181).

At that one special moment, a body and soul come together and – *pow!* – *explode into life*. Deacon Dominic says this dramatically, giving me a quick aside – *women always tear up when I say it like that*. When man and woman are joined in *the marital embrace*, God gives his *breath of life* to produce the whole person. Personhood for Catholics necessarily begins at the moment of conception.

The transformation-creation during conception is easily analogized with the transubstantiation at the altar and the very digestion of the Host itself – both processes occurring inside the body by the grace of God. The metaphorical altars are stomach and womb, “where occult and incomprehensible acts took place, a zone of liturgical mediation” (Camporesi 1989, 232).

###

Deacon Dominic’s explanation in front of a crowd differed in important ways from the private one he gave me.⁴⁷ The differences revealed a difference in motive. To me, he was explaining, convincing a relatively passive listener. His “*Dignitas Personae: On the Dignity of the Person*” lecture for parishioners was a time to announce the moral vocabulary and clarify the lessons behind its use to people who might be followers but might not want to agree. To do it, Deacon Dominic spoke in sound bites, metaphors, and

⁴⁷ My meeting with him happened Feb. 20, 2009. His lecture happened March 3, 2009, as part of the St. Bede lecture series. Sue told me later that it takes probably a year for St. Bede lectures to be approved. They have to be approved by Father Abe and the bishops of the Richmond Diocese. Again, I try to reconstruct the real event as faithfully as possible word for word from my notes.

stories, memorable and with parallel potential. He was generating chunks of Catholic discourse as I watched.

The lecture happened in the sanctuary, with the altar in view behind the PowerPoint screen. A good number of people, all adults, attended, bowing to the altar before filing into the pews.

How do you put ethics and medicine together to make it understandable to the lay people? That's where I come in. If you build a house and it gets destroyed, you might realize you hadn't developed a set of the architect's plans or they might have blown away. These plans are like the church teachings for everyday life. My job is to unfold these plans.

Within the first half of the presentation, Deacon Dominic established authority by appealing to his experience as a teacher and to primary sources (the Catechism and other encyclicals). Then, he defined principles and showed charts. When he got to the most important point, personhood at conception, he interspersed images with strong declarative statements.

Life begins at conception, otherwise an innocent person dies. If you're driving and you see a pile of leaves, it's best to play it safe. Do you know if there's a child in that pile of leaves? You don't drive there. Before the moment of conception there's a man and a woman. At conception there's a third substance. God breathes in his very life. If we are wrong, innocents die. There was a picture that surfaced on the internet. It was a little hand. It was a person's hand in the womb.

The tone changed slightly when Deacon Dominic began to explain reproductive technologies. At this point, he was working to understand the medical, scientific, modern

world in the Catholic moral idiom, bringing it into the familiar representational economy.
Let me translate what it means for our ear.

We heard Deacon Dominic explain *in vitro* fertilization (IVF), embryo transplant, intracytoplasmic injection (ICSI)⁴⁸, freezing of embryos, human cloning, and stem cells. *Reproductive technologies attack the unitive good of the marital embrace*, the good that comes from the fulfillment of the relationship between husband and wife, not necessarily the products of that fulfillment. By tampering with *the marital embrace* in each of the situations, there can be no reaffirmation of vows – no reaffirmation of the covenant or both individuals’ identities. Similarly, *unnatural* birth control methods *attack the procreative good*, the good of the products of the marital embrace, by impeding a couple’s natural purpose of *imaging God by having kids*.⁴⁹

It is a major concern that these procedures occur **outside** the body, indicating that the “hidden altar” in the womb is abandoned. During IVF, *many people are conceived in a petri dish, with sperm that are always gotten by illicit means*. Implied by *illicit*, getting sperm any way other than by the marital embrace is illegal and inhuman, though the *illicit means* are left unexplained. In effect, Deacon Dom is dehumanizing masturbation to make the doctrinal point that anything sacred or reproductive that happens outside of the body is itself inhuman and sinful.

Likewise, implanting embryos is a *sterile procedure that replaces a conjugal act* and freezing an embryo deprives the fetus-person of *their first maternal embrace*, a moving Marian image. Another concern is that of killing unborn people. Though these

⁴⁸ ICSI is an IVF technique of injecting sperm directly into an egg. It is typically used to overcome problems of male infertility (American Pregnancy Association Website).

⁴⁹ All of this talk of *goods* smacks of the utilities and (implied) disutilities of J.S. Mill. One way to think about it is that it’s a utilitarian reading of Catholicism, full of costs and benefits that appeal to the modern American (capitalist).

reproductive technologies are not abortions per se, they are tantamount to the abortive act. IVF, ICSI, and freezing embryos all carry the risk of murder.

In comparison to the risks of killing, human cloning is wrong because it detracts from the uniqueness of each body-soul combination. Still actually a science fiction, Deacon Dominic spoke of cloning very seriously. He imagined the cloning process to be external, non-sexual, and dehumanizing. *They poke it and they make a twin. It thingifies a child.*⁵⁰

The discourse over sickness is again deployed when it comes to making prenatal decisions and public policy about stem cells. It is wrong, we are told, to abort a fetus that is known will become a handicapped baby. *People love their handicapped kids. Children are a gift from God.*

Deacon Dominic allowed a break, Father Abe shook a bunch of hands, and we resumed for the Q&A. The first question was about male fertility. *Corrective male surgeries would certainly be admitted. Drugs like Viagra are permissible. Nutrition help is also permitted.* The idea, it seems, is that birth control repressing the body/matter of the woman is wrong because it goes against her God-given purpose. On the other hand, Viagra is not wrong for men because boosting sperm/spirit production could only be a good thing, suited to a man's God-given purpose.

An elderly man asked, *Is in vitro always illicit or evil? What if you have a husband and wife and they **want** a child? It's the free will of the wife and husband and the child is desired. What if it's a choice?*

⁵⁰ Compare *thingifying a child* to Orsi's discussion of the historic use of children by adults in American Catholic culture to create and maintain relationships with the divine (Orsi 2005, chapter 3).

Deacon Dominic responded with conviction, but in code. *That is the core of the abortion mindset. It's **not** just about will or choice, but about **what** we choose.* By maintaining the metapragmatic categories of acceptable action, Deacon Dominic did not need to make his answer any more clear. There is right and there is wrong.

The third question, from another elderly man, was a little tamer. *Is a medical procedure to get a child always bad?* The answer was equally tame. C-section procedures are fine.

A young man, Sam, asked the next question, revealing his nervous zeal. *It's hard for me to make the case about choice to a non-Catholic. They say it's a woman's right or they talk about rape. How do we argue, make the argument? How do we combat that [abortion?] in an evil culture?* Deacon Dominic responded, giving his own short primer on argumentation with more strong declarative statements.

The next question was a real hurdle. Another young man asked, *What do you do with current embryos that are frozen? Can women have these implanted?*

Deacon Dominic clarified, *Where the church hasn't spoken, we ought to pray. We ought not be more Roman than Rome. As a personal theologian, it would be good – like an adoption. Should the church say no, I would change my answer.* Deacon Dom's first reaction is to point upwards – not to the Bible, not to saints, not even to God – but to *the church*. We ought to pray to God to grant the church information to pass down to us. Truth and power are bound so tightly.

The other questions ranged from *If it's alive at a certain time, then when was it ever dead?* to *I'm concerned about a young 30-something woman who is unmarried and wants a child without the proper family structure* (Barbara).

Another man asked how Adam and Eve increased and multiplied without committing incest. Deacon Dominic responded surprisingly, *We cannot superimpose science on ancients who wrote about Adam and Eve. [Pause] This is a great ice-breaker when you get to Heaven.* Sue (in the audience that night) would make the same joke six months later, as leader of Bible study.⁵¹ The joke is both colloquial and authoritarian; it is itself an ice-breaker.

The Q&A ended on a tense note. An older woman asked, *I have a niece who couldn't have kids. She has a loving husband. She did IVF and had triplets. She kept all three. I don't believe God will judge her or condemn her to hell.* The response was full of the values and stories Deacon Dominic had just performed. *Clearly goods were violated in that situation. If you deliberately commit evil then you sin. God will take into account her culpability. Only she would know.* He then gave this woman and her absent niece the cleansing words, set in first-person for her convenience. *What we do in those situations is we confess. "Bless me Father, for I have sinned." We convict ourselves. "Mea culpa."*

Father Abe offered a closing prayer and we all went home.

⁵¹ It was actually a common joke. I first heard it from Deacon Dominic, and often heard it from leaders and members of Bible studies.

Conclusion

Catholic metaphors of presence have overlapping meanings and a variety of uses. Though analyzable in terms of authority, identity, and piety, the language I heard at St. Bede was not shallow or unemotional. The religious language connects believers to the clergy, morality, choice, and free will, to the entire *communion of saints*, and to God himself.

Whoever tells the story, translating the words, sets meanings. As I explained, the discourse and its moral valences are factors of a situated and consciously constructed faith-History. This History is uniquely made and performed by members of St. Bede at every gathering. Creative opportunity is infinite for metaphors within the discourse. Many analogies bear beautiful expressions of religious faith, proving the very vastness of God to the faithful. Language is uniquely expressive and inspirational.

At the same time, the church as hegemonic institution marks the boundaries of the discourse, authorizing the piety of expressions and feelings. With gaps to fill and parallels to draw, discourse is a flexible authority made in chunks that are passed around within the community. In times of doubt, the clergy are invoked. When questioned they point in turn to either *the church* – the Pope, who has ultimate access – or to God.

It is ultimately through access and language that religious power creates religious truth. Only because of direct access to God can the clergy presume any sort of “reflexive understanding of agency” leading to right or wrong metapragmatic categories of action.⁵² Thus, only through access can the clergy establish the moral system that filters all other doctrine.

⁵² Again, see Keane 2007, 53.

It all comes back to transubstantiation. As the ceremony that defines and distributes access to the divine, it is also the ceremony determining truth. So in contexts of high-risk, multi-life choices, it is transubstantiation and access that Catholics invoke.

Very personal and yet communal, reproductive decision-making provides an arena for the deployment of the most powerful discourse – space for the clergy to flex its mighty muscles. Parishioners are sometimes openly doubtful and questioning. As they answer questions, Deacon Dominic, Father Abe, and others always come back to the transubstantiation and real presence. The Eucharist and the uterus are intimately connected.

Moral imperatives against reproductive technologies uphold the theology of the duality of male and female human natures. But the argument is also necessary to the very reproduction of the Catholic Church. Father Abe and I spoke about the priesthood, *Catholic families are much smaller, a problem we have today. If there is only one son, he's probably not encouraged to be a priest. If God is calling, who is anyone to stand in the way?* The conversation then turned to sexuality. *Fertility is not a disease. It's a power. It is a gift, not a curse.* Implied are the threats birth control and abortion level on the entire Catholic community – the ability of parishioners to sin by murdering actual fellow community members.

I would not suggest that the only argument against abortion stems from the need for more bodies in pews or priests at altars. Nor would I suggest there is only one layer to the argument against abortion and reproductive technologies. *Reproduction is a moral issue* (Father Abe), informed by doctrine and faith-History. An even broader layer of meaning exists here – abortion or lack of abortion as an act on the female body. Beyond

consumption of the Host, the church exercises power through language ideology on the very bodies of its parishioners, with heaven or hell riding on their choices.

What is at stake in the abortion debate is not only the domination of the female body by male religious authorities, but also the very fundamental concepts of mind and body working to make pious Catholics.⁵³ “This means that the question of reform of this tradition cannot start simply from an advocacy of woman’s emancipation from male control, but necessitates a much deeper engagement with the architecture of the self” (Mahmood 2002, 217). In other words, though female bodies **are** dominated (linguistically, if not also in practice), we ought not condemn and dismiss female Catholic piety as merely submissive.

Upon the altar and within the womb, the human and unremarkable is transformed into the mystical and glorious. The actual processes are very much a mystery of faith. The most a common parishioner can do is to talk upwards in explanation, pointing to the clergy, Heaven, or both. It is no wonder that, when one of these moments comes under threat, metaphors and meanings are summoned for deployment. It is no wonder, as well, that the lay follow, translating and recycling what they have practiced.

⁵³ This is the exact point Mahmood makes for the women in the Islamic revival movement in Egypt. See Mahmood 2002, 217.

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