

Ready for communion: Living in holy space

by [Jan Schnell Rippentrop](#) in the [August 19, 2015](#) issue



A baptismal font and communion table. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Joe Shlabotnik](#)

It takes longer to set up for worship with the “help” of two-year-old Claire, so Pastor Johnson arrives early on this Sunday when her husband is on call. After a quick game of hide-and-seek, Claire discovers the not-so-secret hiding place for the hex wrench. After unlocking the door, it’s off with the coats and on to more hide-and-seek as mother and daughter locate elusively placed light switches. In the kitchen they pour water into two identical pitchers pulled from the fleet of pitchers in the cupboard under the drawer that holds the coffee creamer and filters. Then down the aisle to the font, where *most* of the water makes its way into a marble basin. The paraments are green. Check. The bulletins are out. Check. Alvin, always the first to show up, arrives and chats while plugging in the coffee pots.

A half hour before worship Pastor Johnson and Claire trot down to the nursery, which is dark. Supposing that the attendant must be running late, Pastor Johnson leads Claire back up to the sanctuary and marks the scriptural readings. Together they ensure that the acolytes’ torches have enough wick, grab a glass of water, and make

an emergency trip to the potty. Then one of the ushers snags Claire to hand out bulletins. “Thank you!” says Pastor Johnson as she flies down to the nursery where . . . it’s still dark. She throws on her alb, stole, and microphone, and wonders where Claire is going to be during worship. As she emerges from her office, she sees Hannah, a high schooler. “The nursery is dark . . . worship starts in five . . . can Claire sit with you?” Pastor Johnson pleads.

Fast forward to communion. Hannah brings Claire up to her mama’s side of the sanctuary, which Claire’s dad would have avoided because of Claire’s tendency to yell out, “I want my mama!” when in close proximity.

Pastor Johnson approaches Hannah and Claire with the communion assistants, sees two small hands slap down on the communion rail, and is glad she knows the words “This is the body of Christ” by heart. Claire receives a blessing, her mom’s thumb tracing a cross on her forehead; Hannah receives communion. Hannah stands up and motions for Claire to come along, but Claire’s hands are still clamped onto the rail as the communion assistants move away. This is the moment when Claire chooses to yell, “I want the body of Christ!”

Pastor Johnson has no idea how Hannah persuades Claire to leave the communion rail, but she can see the wave effect of good laughter and heads turning as the two of them make their way down the aisle, with Claire chanting her phrase over and over again.

Claire’s yearning exhibits an awareness of the sacramentality of life, the embodiment of life in the Spirit—being both drawn into that life and living out from it. Many theologians have referred to this pairing as *exitus/reditus*—an exit and return that’s much like the in-and-out of breathing.

In *Symbol and Sacrament: A Sacramental Reinterpretation of Christian Existence*, Louis-Marie Chauvet speaks of the patterned *exitus/reditus* of the sacramental life. By sacramental, he means neither the sacraments themselves nor a sentimental idea of sacramental characteristics. He articulates the relationship between sacraments and sacramentality by saying that sacraments allow us “entrance into, and empowerment to live out, the . . . sacramentality which is the very essence of Christian existence.”

Chauvet does not want to collapse all the goods of the Christian life into an indiscriminate lump of sacramentality, but he does want to fight for a fuller

understanding of sacramentality. Thus “the sacramentality of life” is the breath of Christian life—life that springs from the sacraments and life that yearns to return to the sacraments.

Young Claire had been at the communion rail a hundred times before she found words to express what she had noticed and what drew her. The assembly responded to her awareness of the Spirit’s pull. Shaking hands after worship, Pastor Johnson heard comments like “*Someone’s* ready for communion” and “The choir decided before the end of the communion hymns that we’ve gotta get her communion next week.” The sacramental draw or return to God is so strong that those who are around the person who expresses that yearning can perceive it, too.

The exitus, or the sacramental flow outward, is also palpable. Claire’s words became proclamation. One 15-year-old bypassed the handshaking line and circled around behind Pastor Johnson to say, “I guess that’s what you mean by being hungry for the meal.” Those who had not heard Claire wanted to know what she’d said. Later in the week, the quilting group got on the subject. A couple of them stopped by Pastor Johnson’s office to say that Claire’s words had made them think about how long it’d been since they yearned for the bread and wine, and about what was happening in their life when they’d felt a strong need to be at the table.

Claire’s words had gone out and were returning to God through others. Chauvet points out that the word of God is deeply related to the sacramentality of life because the word, “far from being external to their condition as ‘witnesses,’ leads directly through them.” Our lives as conduits of the word are both instituted by the sacramental life and instituting of the sacramental life.

Nellie was in a nursing home and in her last year of life. As her pastor I visited Nellie with communion. I liked to take something with me—a craft from the Sunday school children, a bulletin, or a photo. Nellie didn’t remember me or our church, and on most visits she didn’t speak, but she would take a photo and hold it while I told her a story about a baptism or a celebration. Her favorites seemed to be the soft crafts that the kids made—once it was a God’s eye made out of yarn and popsicle sticks that she kept stroking and turning over and over.

One day Nellie surprised me. We were praying the Lord’s Prayer when she abruptly sat forward, cupped her hands together, and laid them in her lap—her forearms resting on her legs as if she was so familiar with this posture that her body settled

like water into the places it was supposed to be. Then I heard her speak. I didn't know what she was saying at first because I was unthinkingly leading the praying, but I lowered my volume until I could hear her. She was saying the "transgressions" version instead of the "sins" version I had started, so I let Nellie lead the rest of the prayer. Afterward, without opening her eyes, she slouched in her chair, back into a more distant place.

Nellie gave me a new perspective on the formation of the Christian life. The sacramentality of life—the ways our lives flow from and return to God—is formed over the long haul through practices that form our ways of knowing and being in the world. Nellie's many repetitions of the Lord's Prayer had formed her in such a way that her body knew the prayer beyond cognitive knowing. Our awareness of sacramentality is not only cognitive; it's often a bodily awareness acquired through practices of a life lived leaning into the coming of God.

Chauvet adds another layer to the conversation when he refers to the "double aspect" of sacramentality: on the one hand, it's revelation; on the other hand, it's empowerment. God draws a person in, thereby facilitating the return to God. In addition to this inward, returning breath of God's sustaining power in our lives, there's an exhale—the breath that flows toward the rest of the world. Chauvet talks about this as empowerment.

Empowerment originates with God and is supported by practices that seek awareness of God's presence. God's word, for example, empowers us to know God's presence because it places us on a path where we are met by God—a path along which we encounter new beginnings.

According to Chauvet, the outward movement of empowerment occurs in the Spirit, who moves us to prophetic proclamation in our world. Now our lives become sites where sacramentality is expressed as ethics. This bridge between the two implies that the Spirit repeatedly sends us into the world on behalf of the world. When we live out of this life in the Spirit, we participate in the world for the sake of the good. Claire's mantra flows beyond her and causes ripples in the congregation. Nellie's embodiment of a prayer-formed life underscores the vitality of spiritual practices and the interconnectedness of our bodies and faith.

Although the sacramentality of life cannot be blocked, our *perception* of the sacramentality of life can be either inhibited or augmented. One thing that inhibits

our perceptiveness of the world is the flooding of our senses with multiple messages. This is not new, but it's an escalating problem. In the *New York Times*, Louise Story reported that, according to a market research firm, "a person living in a city 30 years ago saw up to 2,000 ad messages a day, compared with up to 5,000 today." Another research group defines the information overload as "an ongoing crisis that diminishes productivity and quality of life among knowledge workers worldwide." Whereas the quantity of human knowledge has been doubling every century until 1900, these days it doubles every 18 months.

The thousands of messages bombarding us each day through e-mail, marketing, and social media cause our defense mechanisms to kick in. We are forced to learn adaptive life-preservation skills. This problem has birthed books like Kevin Miller's *Surviving Information Overload*. In his "practical guide to help you stay on top of what you need to know," Miller spends a lot of time identifying things that one can choose to ignore, then offers techniques for blocking out unwanted information.

Meanwhile, marketers continue to put their messages "in our faces." The roads we travel are dotted with billboards. Urgent messages arrive in our inboxes, and pop-up reminders punctuate our days. The new technologies find paths through our defenses; they make their branding impossible to miss; they come with obvious demands for our attention; they take the guessing out of the game.

In comparison, perception of the sacramentality of life is low-tech and can be subtle, complex, and even uncertain. It may require delayed gratification. In our culture, it's not surprising that the sacramentality of life seems faint. We are urgently blocking messages and decreasing perceptiveness when our awareness of the sacramentality of life depends on our perceptiveness of God's movement in the world!

Yet this is by no means only a dismal story. Perhaps ironically, our defenses against the onslaught of messages may align with ancient practices of sacramentality. Think about Elijah at Horeb. He did not encounter God in the attention-demanding great wind or earthquake or fire but in the sheer silence, where he heard a voice asking, "What are you doing here?" The passage in 1 Kings suggests that we seek God by waiting in and through the storm for the still small voice.

A strange parallel presents itself: the books that suggest that we reduce distractions, take breaks, get away, and have down time every day are advocating practices that remind us of spiritual practices such as centering prayer and Shabbat. What if we

were to view engagement in our Christian practices as a proactive response to our God—a response that provides breath in a world where one can suffocate under the pressure of demands for our attention?

Examples from the Bible of the sacramentality of life are bounteous. Look at stories that illumine the sacramentality of life—Abraham untangling the ram, Miriam singing our story, Moses undoing his sandals, or Ruth gleaning at the margins. In Luke’s Gospel, two of Jesus’ prayer practices illustrate the sacramentality of life. Jesus took time away to pray alone. He found deserted places where silence replaced the noisiness of marketplace transactions. It’s vital to note that Jesus did not take time away because there was nothing going on or because he had a lull in his schedule; he took time away even when there was more than ever on his docket. Luke 5:15-16 says, “But now more than ever the word about Jesus spread abroad; many crowds would gather to hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places and pray.”

Furthermore, Jesus practiced dialog with God. “Then he withdrew from them about a stone’s throw, knelt down, and prayed, ‘Father, if you are willing, remove this cup from me; yet, not my will but yours be done’ . . . he prayed more earnestly, and his sweat became like great drops of blood falling down on the ground” (Luke 22:41-44). Jesus is not drawn to this practice because it’s easy and he feels good afterward. His prayer is heavy. Jesus asks straight out for what he wants, yet remains attentive to and committed to the way God the Father is moving.

Jesus’ prayer practices remind us of our deep connection to and reliance on the practices that augment our perceptiveness of the sacramentality of life. Within Jesus’ prayer, we note silence, time apart, and dialog with God. Many of us long for these things to be part of our lives. We say we need another weekend; we say we need more time in the day. On a deeper level we yearn for Shabbat, and we know that God continues to give us the gift of Shabbat. God is giving that for which we long. We are welcome to take breaks from the pressure of the nearly constant onslaught of messages. We are drawn to take more breath in our lives.

Sacramentality is not just the absence of information overload; it’s the *presence* of practices that bring us into predictable awareness of the divine. Therefore, we respond and breathe in the Spirit. We seek the sacramentality of life—the entrance into and the empowerment to live out of life in the Spirit. I’m convinced that there are subtle moments of sacramentality happening often around us that we do not

see. They come in the interstitial spaces of life—kneading dough, harvesting crops, rocking a child, deep breaths into silence. These are valuable and compelling pop-up reminders of God’s gracious movement in our lives. They remind us of God’s accompaniment on our paths from suffering toward redemption, and compel us toward full life in the Spirit.

As we become aware of the sacramentality of life, we welcome the moments when we drink deeply from the holy space around us. We begin, in whatever way we can, to speak the prayer that springs from our lips. Maybe it is lament—“My God, my God . . .” Maybe it’s awe—“Hallowed be thy name.” Maybe it’s longing—“I want the body of Christ.” Whatever else it is, it’s certainly the sacramental life.