

ANAMNESIS AND ALLEGORY IN AMBROSE'S *DE SACRAMENTIS* AND *DE MYSTERIIS*

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The importance of the liturgy for theology cannot be overstated. The phrase *legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*, ascribed to Prosper of Aquitaine,¹ means that the Church's "law of belief" is seen in her "law of prayer" (*lex orandi, lex credendi*).² We see in the catechetical instructions of the Church Fathers, including Ambrose of Milan,³ that this relationship of the liturgy to belief was well understood by the early Church. Since the liturgy is a primary source for theology, the maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi* takes a prominent position in the method of liturgical theology.

This article will investigate two of the key elements of Ambrose of Milan's catechetical instructions: 1) *anamnesis* or ritual memorial, and 2) how Ambrose used allegory (or typology) as a pedagogical tool to convey the meaning of the sacraments to his neophyte audience.⁴ The study will be restricted to the *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis* commonly called mystagogies because their subject matter was the "mysteries" or sacraments.

Before entering into a discussion of the mystagogy of Ambrose, it is germane to the question to first state that any authentic theology must show how it directs man to a proper and full response to and worship of God, who reveals himself as a "Thou," and who invites all men into a relationship with Himself. It is primarily through the liturgy that man encounters the living God and is empowered to make an adequate and full response to Him. It is in this light that the expression, *lex orandi, lex credendi*, receives its full meaning. In his everyday life, the supernatural

- 1 It was St. Prosper of Aquitaine who first articulated the expression *legem credenda lex statuat supplicandi* (that is, "the law of prayer may establish the law of belief"), later to be formulated as "the law of belief is the law of prayer." Prosper was born in France, c. A.D. 390; d. probably in Rome, after 455. He dialogued with St. Augustine of Hippo on the theology of grace, predestination, and the semi-Pelagian heresy. See F. X. Murphy, "St. Prosper of Aquitaine," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 11, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 771-772.
- 2 Kevin Irwin, "Liturgical Theology," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990), 722.
- 3 St. Ambrose (b. Trèves [Trier, Germany], c. A.D. 339; d. Milan, 397): Bishop of Milan, Father and Doctor of the Church. Ambrose was influenced in his theology by St. Athanasius, Didymus the Blind, St. Cyril of Jerusalem, St. Basil, and Hippolytus. His exegesis of Scripture was profoundly influenced by the allegorical method of Philo and Origen. St. Ambrose was instrumental in the conversion of St. Augustine of Hippo to Christianity. See M. R. P. McGuire, "St. Ambrose," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, Vol. 1., 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 337-340.
- 4 The term *neophyte* (Gr. νεόφυτος; L. *neophytus*—new plant) refers to the newly initiated Christian, that is, a person who has recently converted and received the sacraments of baptism, confirmation, and Eucharist. In the Catholic Church today, a new convert is called a *neophyte* for a year after baptism.

faith of man is expressed most fully in the liturgical act. With that said, let us now take a step back into the fourth century.

Although doubted for a long time, scholars are now quite certain that Ambrose was the author of *De sacramentis* (*On the sacraments*), a set of six sermons that were probably preached in the week after Easter, about 391. *De mysteriis* (*On the mysteries*) appears to be an abridged version of *De sacramentis*, which was prepared for publication. Probably due to the *disciplina arcani*, *De mysteriis* is a much shorter text, which omits certain parts found in *De sacramentis*.

The purpose of mystagogy⁵ in the fourth century was to introduce the newly baptized Christian to the knowledge of the "mystery."⁶ Consequently, mystagogy can refer to the initiation, via the liturgy, of the neophyte into the mystery of salvation that has taken place in history. For us to understand this, it is worth investigating how the Church Fathers saw the liturgical rites as embodying the mystery of salvation and enabling the Christian to participate in it.

There were four writers in the Patristic period whose mystagogical instructions are available to use today: John Chrysostom, Cyril of Jerusalem, Theodore of Mopsuestia, and Ambrose of Milan. Due to the depth and mystery of the subject matter, each Father tends to emphasize different aspects. John Chrysostom concentrates on the moral implications for participating in the sacramental life and the attainment of the eschatological realities that the sacraments promise,⁷ "Cyril stress[es] how the liturgical present image[s] the scriptural past; Theodore stress[es] how the liturgical present foreshadow[s] the eschatological future; and Ambrose stress[es] how visible rites point to invisible realities."⁸ There is a great mystery in each of these.

For Ambrose, it is a question of how a ritual action makes present the mystery of salvation accomplished in Jesus Christ centuries earlier. Ambrose believes that it has been actuated throughout salvation history, even prior to the coming of Christ, by way of figure and truth, shadow and reality. The typological interpreta-

5 Mystagogical catechesis, or liturgical catechesis, is the specific form of catechesis given to neophytes in order to explain the significance of rituals, signs, and symbols that they experienced at their initiation at the Easter Vigil. Mystagogy contrasts with the pre-baptismal catechesis of the catechumen (that is, the unbaptized person) which is didactic in nature and focuses on the foundational Christian beliefs formulated in the Creeds. See "Mystagogy," *New Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol. 10, 2nd ed. (Detroit: Gale, 2003), 77. Catechesis, in general, refers to the instruction given to those whom, having been evangelized, have come to initial faith. Catechesis "has the twofold objective of maturing the initial faith and of educating the true disciple of Christ by means of a deeper and more systematic knowledge of the person and the message of our Lord Jesus Christ" (Pope John Paul II, *Catechesi tradendae: Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in Our Time* [Rome: 1979], 19).

6 Enrico Mazza, *Mystagogy: A Theology of Liturgy in the Patristic Age* (New York: Pueblo, 1989), 25.

7 Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 166.

8 William Harmless, *Augustine and the Catechumenate* (Collegeville MN: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 364.

tion of salvation history by Ambrose is a useful pedagogical tool to provide great insight into the eternal mysteries which every human person is called to enter.⁹ It is through typology that Ambrose explains the notion of ritual memorial or *anamnesis*,¹⁰ which was central to the early Church's understanding of making a past event present to those participating in the liturgical action.

Ritual Memorial

Although Ambrose does not use the terms *anamnesis* or ritual memorial, he does show the meaning of the Christian sacraments by referring to the key concepts of *anamnesis* and actualization. The liturgies of ancient Israel constituted memorials of an ancient event not by way of mere reminiscence, but by making the actual event present or by making each person (liturgically) a contemporary of the past event. In the *Mishnah* (a collection of Jewish law from the early third century), Rabbi Gamaliel puts it this way:

In every generation a man must so regard himself as if he came forth himself out of Egypt, for it is written, "And you shall tell your son on that day saying, 'It is because of that which the Lord did for me when I came forth out of Egypt.'"¹¹

The Christian Eucharist instituted by Christ at the Last Supper conforms with, and continues, this ancient Jewish concept of liturgical memorial. As we shall see, Ambrose follows this tradition in his catecheses, *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis*, using allegory as his pedagogical method of explanation.

Jewish cultic practice was based upon an historic-prophetic memorial due to the fact that God has manifested himself in history. There are two types of memory: simple memory which is static, and a living act of commemoration which

9 The use of the phrase "eternal mysteries" here must be clearly understood. Just as the saving events of Christ's life were historical, so also are each succeeding liturgy we celebrate throughout our lives. They are events in our historical lives which have eternal effects in us. At the liturgy, through our memorial of what Christ accomplished once and for all, the cross is realized anew in the historical events of our lives precisely insofar as his offering is realized in our self-offerings. Thus, through the sacraments we are able to participate in the mysterious, eternal self-offering of Christ to the Father—expressed historically on the cross—and the Father's loving acceptance of this offering by historically raising Jesus from the dead.

10 The Greek word *anamnesis* has been translated variously as "memorial," "remembrance," "commemoration," and "memory" (Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 91). Max Thurian (*The Eucharistic Memorial*, trans. J. G. Davies [Richmond, VA: John Knox Press, 1962], 18) prefers to translate *anamnesis* as "memorial" and to abandon "remembrance" and "memory" since the modern conception of these terms implies a mere mental act, a limitation which is lacking in the ancient meaning of the term.

11 Robert Louis Wilken, *The Spirit of Early Christian Thought* (New Haven: Yale University, 2003), 34. Wilken comments, "Those who celebrate Pesach [Passover] are not spectators, they are participants." See also Nahum Glatzer, *The Passover Haggadah, with English Translation, Introduction, and Commentary* (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 5.

makes the event alive in the present and enables the participants to look to the future.¹² Both the Jewish and Christian cultic practices include this second memorial in which the communal memory enables a people to regenerate itself. The paradigm for *anamnesis* in ancient Israel's liturgical tradition was the Passover *seder*.¹³ Although no texts are available to us for the Jewish Passover dating from the time of Jesus, the civil and religious rules which are contained in a body of works called the *Mishnah*¹⁴—particularly the *Pesahim*, *Tosefta*, and *Sifrei*—do relate an outline of the Passover meal.¹⁵ To use an expression of John McKenna, this c. A.D. 200 text shows a “communal memory that regenerates those remembering.”¹⁶

Key to understanding the liturgy and scriptures of ancient Israel is the notion of covenant. Scripture is clear that Yahweh formed the people of Israel and saw it as his first-born son (see Exod. 4:22; Hos. 11:1). The covenant relationship between Yahweh and Israel is therefore best understood as a family or kinship bond.¹⁷ A solemn ritual oath was always a common element in the establishment of an ancient covenant. Such oaths were not mere words, but “speech acts” or “performative language” because they accomplished what they signified, hence really making a kinship bond between God and Israel.¹⁸ These covenants were frequently sealed by ritual actions (signs) such as sacrifices and meals, which became synonymous with the covenant itself.¹⁹ Further, “The meal was a familial communion between God and man.”²⁰ Covenant signs such as these meals were performed by future generations within a liturgical context in order to renew and remember the historical sealing of the covenant.²¹ Following the Exodus event, covenant remembrance was essential for the identity of Israel because it was through the work of Yahweh liberating the people from Egyptian slavery and giving them the Promised Land, in accordance with his promises to their father Abraham, that Israel was formed as a nation. Without this heritage, Israel would not have come into existence.

12 Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament* (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 235.

13 From the Hebrew meaning “order” or “sequence,” *seder* is the word used to denote the ritualized dinner observed during Passover.

14 The *Mishnah* (A.D. c. 200) is the first major edition of the Jewish oral traditions. In this document, Rabbi Judah the Patriarch compiled the oral traditions of the Pharisaic period, that is, the end of the Exile until the destruction of the Temple in A.D. 70.

15 Sofia Cavalletti, “Memorial and Typology in Jewish and Christian Liturgy,” *Letter and Spirit* 1 (2005): 75.

16 John McKenna, “Eucharist and Memorial,” *Worship* 79 (2005): 505.

17 Scott Hahn, *Letter and Spirit: From Written Text to Living Word in the Liturgy*, (London: Darton, Longmann, and Todd, 2006), 55. For a thorough treatment of biblical covenants see Scott Hahn, *Kinship by Covenant: A Canonical Approach to the Fulfillment of God's Saving Promises* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

18 Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 56.

19 Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 56.

20 Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 57.

21 Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 58.

It is for this reason that Chauvet says that the memory of the people both forms and regenerates their identity.²² In realizing, or better still, *actualizing* their liberation from Egyptian slavery through the liturgical celebration of Passover, future generations of Israelites are formed as God's People and continue the hope of future redemption. It is not a mere looking back at history, but a making present or actualization of the event with its effects, as well as a hope for the future: "In its Passover memorial, Israel receives its past as present, and this gift guarantees a promise of a future."²³ Let us now take a look at the Passover ritual to better appreciate the notion of *anamnesis*.

An integral part of the Passover meal consists of the Haggadah²⁴ in which the Exodus story is narrated. Here, the youngest *child* asks his father, the celebrant or master of the *seder*, "Why does this night differ from all other nights?"²⁵ In reply, the father places the *seder* meal in the context of their family story "beginning with the humiliation [namely, Egyptian slavery and idolatry (Deut. 26:5–9)] and ending with the glory [that is, entrance into the Promised Land and the building of the Temple]."²⁶ This ritual of question and reply had to be performed even if everyone present knew the story, or if there was just one person celebrating Passover because it was the ritual enactment of the *seder* that actualized the ancient event, making it present for the participants. Cavalletti explains, "this history is never really past, since it is reenacted in the person of every Jew who participates in the Passover rite. ... According to the Mishnah, every Jew must 'consider himself as having come forth from Egypt.'²⁷ This practice follows that of Moses, who taught the second generation of the Israelites who escaped the clutches of Egypt: "The Lord our God made a covenant with us in Horeb. Not with our fathers did the Lord make this covenant, but with us, who are all of us here alive this day" (Deut. 5:2–3). It is the very act of remembering that inserts one into the event which the celebration commemorates.²⁸

22 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 233.

23 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 234.

24 *Haggadah* refers to the text that guides the ritual action and prayer of the Jewish *Seder* celebrating Passover. This text provides a commentary of the Exodus story including a religious philosophy of Jewish history, and responses to the children's questions during the ritual. More broadly, the *Haggadah* refers to the non-legal part of Rabbinic literature.

25 Glatzer, *Passover Haggadah*, 21.

26 *Pesahim* 10.4; Glatzer, *Passover Haggadah*, 7.

27 Cavalletti, *Memorial and Typology*, 77. See also *Pesahim* 10.5; Glatzer, *Passover Haggadah*, 5.

28 J.J. Von Almen, *Essai sur le repas du Seigneur (Essay on the Lord's Supper)* (Neuchâtel: Delachaux-Niestlé, 1996), 24, cited in Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 232.

According to the Mishnah Pesahim, the midrash²⁹ on Deut. 26:5–8 forms the crux of the Passover Haggadah.³⁰ The ritual prayers in this section include the narration of past events in the past and present tenses:

A wandering Aramean was my father; and he went down into Egypt and sojourned there. ... Then we cried to the Lord the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice, and saw our affliction ... and the Lord brought us out of Egypt ... into this place and gave us this land. ... And behold, now I bring the first of the fruit of the ground, which thou, O Lord, has given me.' (Deut. 26:5–10).³¹

The narration switches from the first person singular to the first person plural to enable the narrator to be identified with those of the historical event thus “snatch[ing] it out of its pure anecdotal ‘pastness’ to reveal its power as a *founding present* ... today, Yahweh gives the promised land to Israel.”³² Chauvet comments that such a narration has the intention of inserting those who are remembering into the very event which the celebration commemorates.³³

For centuries Christians have seen the link between the Jewish liturgical function and the Christian sacraments. Max Thurian explains that while the Passover was being celebrated:

... the Jews could re-live mystically, *sacramentally*, the events of the deliverance and Exodus from Egypt. They became contemporaries of their forefathers and were saved with them. There was in the mystery of the paschal meal a kind of telescoping of two periods of history, the present and the Exodus. The past event became present or rather each person became a contemporary of the past event. ... It is the mystery of this redemptive act accomplished once for all [that is, Christ's act of redemption] and yet ever renewed, present, and applied, that the Church came to designate by the word ... *sacramentum*.³⁴

29 Midrash is a type of Rabbinical exegesis of the Hebrew Scriptures compiled between A.D. 400–1200. It is comprised of two forms: the *Haggadah*, which explains non-legal texts (e.g. stories, parables, legends, history, etc.), and the *Halakah*, which explains legal texts.

30 Glatzer, *Passover Haggadah*, 30.

31 The translation is the RSV.

32 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 236.

33 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 232.

34 Thurian, *The Eucharistic Memorial*, 19.

As we can see here, Thurian believes that the Christian sacraments follow the Jewish tradition of memorial or *anamnesis*. Thurian is not alone in this belief.³⁵ We shall see below that Ambrose shared this notion of *anamnesis*, as evidenced in his mystagogical catechesis on the meaning of the sacraments to his neophyte audience.

Ambrose's Notion of *Anamnesis*

Although he does not use the terms *anamnesis* or memorial, Ambrose refers to a ritual memorial act when he catechizes the newly baptized about their having died with Christ when they descended into the baptismal waters, and having risen with Christ as they came out:

You were asked: "Do you believe in God the Father almighty?" You said: "I do believe," and you dipped, that is: you were buried. Again you were asked: "Do you believe in our Lord Jesus Christ and in His cross?" You said: "I do believe," and you dipped. So you were also buried together with Christ. For who is buried with Christ rises again with Christ. A third time you were asked: Do you believe also in the Holy Spirit?" You said: "I do believe," you dipped a third time, so that the threefold confession absolved the multiple lapse of a former life.³⁶

This passage demonstrates the belief that performative language or "speech-acts" constitute this liturgical rite, enabling the catechumens to truly die with Christ, to enter into his tomb and to rise again with him to newness of life.³⁷ Through the liturgical ritual the catechumen is *actually* conformed to Christ in his death and resurrection. Ambrose is far from innovative here. Rather, he is within a constant tradition stemming from the testimony of St. Paul:

Do you not know that all of us who have been baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into this death? We were buried therefore with him by baptism into death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might walk in newness of life. For if we have been united with him

35 Other authors have noted such a relation: Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 231–233; Wilken, *Spirit of the Early Christians*, 34–35; Cavaletti, *Memorial and Typology*, 75–82; Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 88–102.

36 *De sacramentis* ["On the Sacraments"], bk. II, c. 7, n. 20, in *Patrologiae Cursus Completus, Series Latina*, ed. J.P. Migne (Paris: Garnier and J.P. Migne, 1844–1864), 16:429. Hereafter abbreviated PL.

37 Hahn, *Letter and Spirit*, 89.

in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his (Rom. 6:3–5).³⁸

The abstruse nature of the sacramental realities for the neophytes does not escape the purview of Ambrose. He is keenly aware of the need for his audience to appreciate the power of the sacraments to put the faithful in contact with the saving events of Christ's life. In order to provide credibility to his argument, Ambrose enumerates example after example of Old Testament events, all demonstrating God's power to save. The virtue of this method of mystagogical teaching highlights what Louis Bouyer sees as the memorial content of the Eucharist: first, the cross of Christ; second, all the events and persons leading up to Christ throughout history; and, finally, the effects resulting from the passion of Christ including his resurrection, ascension, and second coming.³⁹ Bouyer points out that through the Liturgy of the Word, God's actions throughout human history are remembered by the faithful. The Liturgy of the Word consequently functions to lead into the Liturgy of the Eucharist where the climax of God's actions through the total giving of Himself in the Word made flesh is commemorated. We therefore can see an integral relationship between the two successive parts, which together form "one liturgy of the Word."⁴⁰ Mystagogical catechesis, like that of Ambrose, opens up to the faithful a deep understanding of the mysteries that are commemorated through the Eucharistic memorial of Christ acting through, with, and in the community.

By relating the story of Christ opening the deaf mute's ears to hear the Gospel (Mark 1:31–37), Ambrose hopes to show that the sacramental rites have opened the hearts of the neophytes that they may perceive the mysteries of salvation hidden in the Old Testament and made manifest in the Christian sacraments.⁴¹ Beginning with St. Paul's words, "His [God's] eternal power also and divinity are estimated by His works" (Rom. 1:20),⁴² the catechetical instruction boldly moves to the Old Testament to consider the figures of the great Christian mysteries.

Baptism

In the baptismal liturgy, Ambrose likens the *power* of the sacrament to that which occurred in the Old Testament when the Hebrews passed through the Red Sea through the power of Moses as he placed his staff into the waters,⁴³ or when the prophet Elisha spoke the word and raised the head of the axe to the surface of the

38 RSV.

39 Louis Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1955), 78–79.

40 Bouyer, *Liturgical Piety*, 79.

41 *De mysteriis*, ["On the Mysteries"], c. III, nn. 3–4 (PL 16:389–390).

42 *De mysteriis*, c. III, n. 8 (PL 16:391).

43 *De mysteriis*, c. III, n. 12 (PL 16:392–393).

water,⁴⁴ or when Naaman went to Elisha seeking a cure for his leprosy and was told to bathe in the waters of the Jordan seven times.⁴⁵ Each of these events prefigured the Christian sacrament of baptism in different ways.

First, the Hebrews were fleeing the slavery of the Egyptians but were faced with certain death when hemmed in by the Red Sea with their enemy at their heels.⁴⁶ It was only through the promise that God would deliver them that Moses was able to perform the miracle of parting the Red Sea to enable the people to be liberated with the subsequent destruction of their enemy when the waters returned. Second, Ambrose understands the episode of Elisha raising the submerged axe head (2 Kings 6:5) as a symbol of the unbaptized who, submerged by sin, will surely die without the powerful word of God which raises them to new life.⁴⁷ Third, Ambrose interprets Naaman's miraculous cure as symbolizing liberation from sin, a disease of the soul.⁴⁸ Ambrose is emphatic that these Old Testament mysteries were inferior to the Christian sacraments for they did not bring eternal life, but only temporal blessings.

These three Old Testament events help interpret the institution of Christian baptism by Jesus at his own baptism by John in the Jordan (Matt. 3:13–17). We read that John's objection is that Jesus should be baptizing him, as this would seem more fitting considering he is the Son of God. However, Jesus explains that in order to fulfill all righteousness, it must be John who does the baptizing. It is not Jesus who is cleansed when he descends into the waters; rather it is the water that is sanctified by the Word of God with the descent of the Holy Spirit and the blessing of the Father. The waters of the Jordan were made holy for the sake of our sanctification. It is clear to Ambrose that the baptismal act must be seen in this context.⁴⁹ All who descend into the baptismal waters descend with Christ and are sanctified by the Holy Spirit. Just as the Father in speaking of Jesus declared: "This is my beloved Son in whom I am well pleased," so too those who are baptized into Christ are transformed into the likeness of Christ to be the Father's beloved children. They are made righteous and are filled with the justice of Christ by the work of the Trinity.

Ambrose provides other types or figures of baptism found in the Old Testament. First, at creation the Spirit hovered over the waters and brought about the first creation.⁵⁰ Later, Noah entered the ark while the waters flooded the earth

44 *De mysteriis*, c. IX, n. 51 (PL 16:405–406).

45 *De mysteriis*, c. III, nn. 16–17; c. IV, n. 21 (PL 16:393–395).

46 *De mysteriis*, c. IX, n. 51 (PL 16:405–406); *De sacramentis*, bk. I, c. 6, nn. 20–22 (PL 16:423–424).

47 *De mysteriis*, c. IX, n. 51 (PL 16:405–406); *De sacramentis*, bk. II, c. 4, n. 11 (PL 16:426–427).

48 *De sacramentis*, bk. I, c. 5, n.13–15 (PL 16:421–422).

49 *De sacramentis*, bk. I, c. 5, n.15–19 (PL 16:422–423).

50 *De mysteriis*, c. III, n. 9 (PL 16:392).

and purified it from sin.⁵¹ Noah sends out a raven which does not return—symbolic of sin—then sends out a dove which returns with an olive branch—symbolic of peace of soul and the dwelling of the Holy Spirit who brings about a new creation.⁵² The episode of Moses sweetening the bitter waters of Marah by casting a piece of wood into the fountain is a figure of the wood of the Christ's cross which bestows the sweetness of grace to the waters of baptism.⁵³

Ambrose uses these and other Old Testament stories to demonstrate that since God has worked wonders for his people in former times, there is nothing to prevent him from working even greater wonders now that his Son has come to dwell among us.⁵⁴ The graces and blessings that the neophytes have experienced in the Easter liturgy are of surpassing worth compared to the works of God in the Old Testament. For example, Ambrose compares the "manna [which] rained upon the Jews from heaven" and the true bread from heaven, which is the body of Christ.⁵⁵ Ambrose states, "He who ate the manna died; he who has eaten this body will effect for himself remission of sins and 'shall not die forever'."⁵⁶ Using this method of allegory and figure, Ambrose demonstrates again and again the surpassing greatness of the New Testament sacraments.

The Eucharist

In so far as the Eucharistic liturgy is concerned, there is evidence that Ambrose recognizes the aspect of memorial here too. In his teaching about the Eucharistic prayer to the neophytes, he relates how the narrative begins in the past tense, but switches to the present tense when Christ speaks the words of institution: "Take and drink of this, all of you; for this is my blood." For Ambrose, it is not the priest who speaks these words at the Mass, but Christ himself.⁵⁷ As with every performative action which accomplishes the reality that it describes, so too Christ's words have a performative effect. The wine in the cup "becomes blood by heavenly consecration"⁵⁸ that the "price of redemption may be effected."⁵⁹ This aspect of memorial enables the participants in the liturgical rite to be present at the offering of Christ in his Paschal Mystery.

51 *De mysteriis*, c. III, n. 10 (PL 16:392).

52 *De mysteriis*, c. III, n. 11 (PL 16:392).

53 *De mysteriis*, c. III, n. 14 (PL 16:393).

54 Pamela Jackson, *The Holy Spirit in the Catechesis and Mystagogy of Cyril of Jerusalem, Ambrose, and John Chrysostom* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1987), 219.

55 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 5, n. 24 (PL 16:444).

56 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 5, n. 24 (PL 16:444).

57 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 5, n. 22 (PL 16:444).

58 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 4, n. 19 (PL 16:442).

59 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 4, n. 20 (PL 16:443).

Again, Ambrose does not deviate from tradition, for the Eucharistic prayer that he describes in detail was widely used. Aimé Martimort has analyzed the various parts of the prayer used by Ambrose and concludes: "The formulas so far mentioned within the Eucharistic prayer of the Roman rite—the Preface, narrative of the Last Supper, the anamnesis and the offering—are witnessed to in the *Apostolic Tradition* of Hippolytus and have been practically fixed in the Roman usage since the time of St. Ambrose."⁶⁰

Ambrose further explains that as often as we receive the body and blood of Christ, we proclaim his death and the remission of our sins.⁶¹ In support of this, Ambrose provides us with part of the Eucharistic prayer that was heard at the Easter celebration:

Therefore, mindful of His most glorious passion and resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, we offer you this immaculate victim, a reasonable sacrifice, an unbloody victim, this holy bread, and chalice of eternal life. And we ask and pray that you accept this offering upon your sublime altar through the hands of your angels, just as you deigned to accept the gifts of your just son Abel and the sacrifice of our patriarch Abraham and what the highest priest Melchisedech offered you.⁶²

This being "mindful" or this "remembrance" of Christ's most glorious passion and resurrection from the dead and ascension into heaven, as Ambrose explains, is the "remedy" for our sins.⁶³ In faith we believe that Christ's redemptive act frees us from our sins, but how is this freedom appropriated in each individual person? Ambrose would answer: *liturgically*—through the power of the sacraments to make the redemptive work of Christ actualized here and now for us. It must be remembered that as with the Passover *seder*, where the participants are actually considered to be liberated from Egypt with their predecessors, so too the Christian faithful, as members of Christ's mystical body, are not mere spectators, but real participants in the actualization of Christ's death and resurrection and thereby receive remission for their sins.

How are we to understand Ambrose's connection of the ritual action with Jesus' saving works? An early twentieth century debate about the "*Mysteriengegenwart*," the "mystery presence," may shed some light on the issue. Odo Casel, a German Benedictine liturgical scholar, initiated the debate when he claimed that Christ and his saving works are the basic mystery. In John McKenna's brief summary of the debate, he notes that Casel believed: "To be saved by Christ's actions, we must

60 Aimé Martimort, *The Signs of the New Covenant* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1963), 168.

61 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 6, n. 28 (PL 16:446).

62 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 6, n. 27 (PL 16:445–446).

63 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 6, n. 28 (PL 16:446).

somehow come into contact with them. Christ [...] makes himself present in the liturgy together with those saving deeds.”⁶⁴ In a partial affirmation of Casel’s theology, Edward Kilmartin writes: “The Eucharist renders present the reality of the mystery of the cross in the form of a sacramental memorial meal of the Church. The goal of the Eucharist is the self-offering of the Church with Christ ... in order that believers be changed into the true body of Christ, and become themselves a holy sacrifice.”⁶⁵ This sheds valuable light upon Ambrose’s emphasis on being “mindful” in order that “we proclaim the death of the Lord.”⁶⁶ In so doing, we are put in direct contact with the saving work of Christ.

Allegorical Method

The most striking thing about Ambrose’s *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis* is his dramatic allegorical method for interpreting the Scriptures.⁶⁷ This method, developed within the Alexandrian school, was probably adopted by Ambrose due to his familiarity with the writings of Origen. The method employed three senses of Scripture: the literal, moral, and mystical.⁶⁸ The Alexandrian school tended to “see everything as symbolic of the eschatological blessings revealed in Christ,”⁶⁹ and as a result they were able to arrive at a profound grasp of what Scripture meant as a whole.

The presupposition behind the Alexandrian method is that since all truth comes from the Holy Spirit, “the words of scripture can be used to illuminate any truth to which they can be made to apply.”⁷⁰ In addition, the precedent for the allegorical or typological method is found in the New Testament itself. For example, in 1 Corinthians 10:1–11 St. Paul sees the cloud and the passage through the Red Sea as prefigurements of Christian baptism. He sees in the manna and water from the rock a prefigurement of the Eucharist, the rock being a type of Christ.⁷¹ St. Paul explains that under the literal historical sense of the Old Testament texts, there is a spiritual sense from which we can draw instruction, for which reason these ancient events were committed to writing. Since Ambrose saw Scripture as

64 McKenna, “Eucharist and Memorial,” 513; see also Odo Casel, “Mysteriengegenwart,” *Jahrbuch für Liturgiewissenschaft* 8 (1928): 145.

65 Edward Kilmartin, *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert J. Daly (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1998), 199–200, 202.

66 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 6, nn. 27–28 (PL 16:445–446).

67 Edward Yarnold, *The Awe Inspiring Rites of Initiation: The Origins of the R.C.I.A.*, 2nd ed. (Collegeville, MN: The Liturgical Press, 1994), 98.

68 Jackson, *Holy Spirit*, 91.

69 Henri Crouzel, “Biblical Exegesis: III Spiritual Exegesis,” in *Sacramentum Mundi: An Encyclopedia of Theology. Absolute and Contingent to Constantinian Era*, eds. Karl Rahner et al (New York: Herder and Herder, 1969), I: 205.

70 Yarnold, *Awe Inspiring*, 99.

71 Crouzel, *Biblical Exegesis*, 202. See also St. Paul’s use of allegory in Gal. 4:21–31.

the authoritative source in answering all questions, he draws narrative material, moral instruction, imagery, and typology from Scripture for the content of his catechetical instruction.⁷² As with his contemporaries, Ambrose understands that the “eschatological good things of the Old Testament are the figure, the hope, the foretaste, but that the New Testament gives us their true form here below, a real though imperfect possession of them ‘in a mirror, dimly.’”⁷³

Ambrose begins *De mysteriis* by explaining how he used Scripture in his pre-baptismal catechesis. He reminds the catechumens that they drew from the scriptures a Christian rule of life: “to walk in the paths of our elders and to read in their steps, and to obey the divine oracles.”⁷⁴ This exhortation referred to the lives of the patriarchs or the precepts of the Proverbs which were read to them during their prebaptismal catechesis. Ambrose is attempting to show that the catechumens are like the Old Testament people who journeyed through the desert in preparation for entering the Promised Land. Since the catechumens are on their way to meet Christ in and through the sacraments, they must be morally and spiritually purified for this encounter. As Chauvet notes, there is an “authentic evangelical tension” between life and cult, ethics and ritual practice.⁷⁵ The liturgy must be lived out in one’s ethical life for the very living of it is a self-reflective act since the liturgy is thus accomplished.⁷⁶ The truth of one’s gratitude to God as expressed in the liturgy must be verified in the recognition of the poor. God did not require mere lip-service or ritual sacrifice, but steadfast love and a humble and contrite heart (see Ps. 51:18–19; Isa. 1:10–17; Hos. 6:6; Matt. 9:13, 12:7). This connection between liturgy and ethical life is the basis for Ambrose’s moral catechetical instruction of the catechumens. We can see here that it is by reading the Scriptures that the people are formed.

Ambrose’s use of Scripture in his post-baptismal catecheses, *De sacramentis* and *De mysteriis*, was aimed at giving a “reasoned account of the sacraments.”⁷⁷ Although Ambrose does not speak again of his Scriptural method in these works, we are able to garner deeper insights into it through the rhetorical techniques he used to explain how the realities recorded in the Gospels are personally applied to the neophytes in the sacraments.⁷⁸

Using the Old Testament events, persons, and symbols as types of the sacraments of the Christian dispensation, Ambrose explains the details of the single Christian story that has been gradually disclosed over the course of salvation

72 Jackson, *Holy Spirit*, 90.

73 Crouzel, *Biblical Exegesis*, 202.

74 *De mysteriis*, c. 1, n. 1 (PL 16:389).

75 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 228.

76 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 238.

77 *De mysteriis*, c. 1, n. 2 (PL 16:389); *De sacramentis*, bk. I, c. 1, n. 1 (PL 16:417).

78 Jackson, *Holy Spirit*, 91.

history. This follows the principle that God has entered human history to reveal himself as a “Thou,” inviting people into covenantal relationship with himself. Jean Danielou explains:

The sacraments are conceived in relation to the acts of God in the Old Testament and the New. God acts in the world; His actions are the *mirabilia*,⁷⁹ the deeds that are His alone. God creates, judges, makes a covenant, is present, makes holy, delivers. These same acts are carried out in different phases of the history of salvation. There is, then, a fundamental analogy between these actions. The sacraments are simply the continuation in the era of the Church of God’s acts in the Old Testament and the New. This is the proper significance of the relationship between the Bible and the liturgy. The Bible is a sacred history; the liturgy is a sacred history.⁸⁰

Ambrose perceives the fundamental analogy between the works of God in the Old Testament and in the New Testament. It is for this reason that he reminds his audience of the *mirabilia* of God in the Old Testament; and in doing so he explains the formative and regenerative power of the sacramental liturgy to make the Christian people. Without the memory of where they have come from, the Christian people lose their identity.

Proceeding in this fashion, Ambrose shows in *De mysteriis* that baptism and the mystery of the cross of Christ were present in the great flood and Noah’s ark.⁸¹ As stated above, the flood was a symbol of the cleansing of the flesh from all carnal sin, while the raven was the figure of sin that went out and did not return. Likewise, Ambrose sees images of the power of baptism in the cloud that the Hebrew people were under as they traveled through the wilderness, as well as by their passing through the sea. The cloud cools the carnal passions and the waters destroy the slavery of sin as symbolized in the Egyptians.⁸²

The correspondence between the Old Testament and New Testament persons, events, and things is referred to as “figure” or “truth” by Ambrose: “the figure itself was of benefit to us, since it is an indication of the truth.”⁸³ Following this principle, Ambrose provides the example of the angel who descended upon the pool of Bethesda (John 5:4), giving it the power to heal whoever was first to enter the waters. In the angel, Ambrose sees a figure of Christ who has come to heal

79 *Mirabilia* is the Latin word for wonders, miracles, or marvelous works.

80 Danielou, “The Sacraments in the History of Salvation,” in *The Liturgy and the Word of God* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1959), 28.

81 *De mysteriis*, c. 3, nn. 10–11 (PL 16:392).

82 *De mysteriis*, c. 3, nn. 12–13 (PL 16:392–393).

83 *De sacramentis*, bk. II, c. 1, n. 2 (PL 16:425); see also, Jackson, *Holy Spirit*, 93.

the infirmities of all men through his death and resurrection, the effects of which are applied to us through the sacrament of Baptism.⁸⁴ In *De mysteriis*, Ambrose refers to the angel as the “shadow” of Christ who would heal all men together.⁸⁵ For Ambrose, the truth or reality not only surpasses the figure or shadow, but is also the exemplar and archetype of it. In contrasting Christ with Melchisedech, Ambrose states:

As for Melchisedech, it is said that he has neither beginning of days nor end. If Melchisedech does not have beginning of days, could Christ have had it? Yet it is not more a figure than truth. You see, then, that He himself is both the first and the last: first, because He is the author of all; last, not because he finds the end, but because He includes all things.⁸⁶

Ambrose utilizes images to manifest to the neophytes the great dignity they receive in becoming children of God through baptism. He identifies them with the bride of the Canticles who goes out to meet her Bridegroom, who is Christ the Lord. According to Ambrose, upon seeing the newly baptized, the angels exclaimed: “Who is this that cometh up from the desert whitewashed?”⁸⁷ It is impossible not to see this as a reference to the great love song of the Old Testament: “Who is that coming up from the wilderness, leaning upon her beloved?” (Song 8:5). Traditionally the Jews saw this canticle as the dialogue of love between God, the bridegroom, and Israel, his beloved. The Fathers of the Church, however, saw it as an allegory of the mystical union between Christ and his Church (see Eph. 5:21–33).

By means of typology, Ambrose is able to demonstrate the unity of God’s saving plan for humanity when the Old and New Testaments are superimposed. He does this by showing Christ, the protagonist, being present by way of prefigurements in the Old Testament and by imitations in the sacramental life. “Typology unites past, present, and future.”⁸⁸ The prefigurements are so real for Ambrose that it seems that they are identical with what they prefigure in the New Testament. For example, he likens the rod of Aaron to the newly baptized. The “baptized are no longer ‘dry sticks,’ but have begun to bear fruit”⁸⁹ in the baptistery or tent of the high priest. Again, the washing of Naaman from leprosy (2 Kings 5:14) is identified with the cleansing of baptism that washes away the leprosy of sin.⁹⁰

84 *De sacramentis*, bk. II, c. 2, nn. 3–7 (PL 16:425–426).

85 *De mysteriis*, c. 4, nn. 22, 24 (PL 16:395–396).

86 *De sacramentis*, bk. V, c. 1, n. 1 (PL 16:445–446).

87 *De sacramentis*, bk. IV, c. 2, n. 5 (PL 16:437).

88 Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 34.

89 Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 35.

90 Mazza, *Mystagogy*, 36.

Conclusions

The Eucharistic liturgy was given by Christ to his apostles within the context of the Jewish liturgical tradition which was formed upon *anamnesis* or ritual memorial. Given this context it is clear that the event and effects of Jesus' paschal mystery are actualized for each generation of Christians through the mode of liturgical memorial. Without the liturgy, we would be incapable of being present at the Cross or the empty tomb. But divine providence has provided a means by which we are not mere spectators in these pivotal events of human history, but are rather actually present as contemporaries with Mary and the others at the foot of the cross.

The maxim *lex orandi, lex credendi* also bears new or deeper meaning when we consider that our prayer, which includes the memorial of various mysteries, rules our faith. For it is through our prayer that we are present at the mysteries of our faith. All of this shows to us that liturgy is our teacher and a primary source for our theology. Liturgy teaches us that the best way to show the importance of a past event is to recount it in the way that liturgy memorializes such an event in the present. We do not tell the liturgy, rather we liturgically tell the story that we memorialize.⁹¹

Much more could be said on the manner in which memorial actually operates and how the various aspects of the mysteries hidden for all ages are made manifest to us through the liturgy. But suffice to say, Ambrose and his contemporaries have contributed much to our insight into these mysteries.

91 Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 194.