

Sign, Cause, and Person in St. Thomas's Sacramental Theology: Further Considerations

NATHAN LEFLER
Catholic University of America
Washington, DC

SCHOLARS WRITING since the close of the Second Vatican Council vary widely in their interpretations and evaluations of St. Thomas Aquinas's sacramental theology.¹ Whatever their final judgments, these

¹ Thus, the comparatively modest sampling used in researching this paper runs the gamut of interpretation and appraisal. On one end of the spectrum, J. A. Appleyard ("How Does a Sacrament 'Cause by Signifying'?" *Science et Esprit* 23 [1971]: 167–200), with frequent recourse to Karl Rahner, thinks at least St. Thomas's language, if not his thought itself, has been rendered obsolete by the modern epistemological consciousness. At the other end of the discussion, Liam G. Walsh, OP ("The Divine and the Human in St. Thomas's Theology of Sacraments," in *Ordo sapientiae et amoris: Image et message de Saint Thomas D'Aquin à travers les récentes études historiques, herméneutiques et doctrinales*, ed. Carlos-Josaphat Pinto de Oliveira, OP [Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1993]) makes an eloquent case, against, especially, Schillebeeckx and more recently Chauvet, for the continued value of Thomas's rich theological anthropology—and in Thomas's own terms. Cf. David Crownfield, "The Seminal Trace: Presence, Difference, and Transubstantiation," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 59 (1991): 361–71; Avery Dulles, SJ, "The Spiritual Community of Man: The Church According to Saint Thomas," in *Calgary Aquinas Studies*, ed. Anthony Parel (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1978); Peter J. Leithart, "Christ's Christened into Christ: Priesthood and Initiation in Augustine and Aquinas," *Studia Liturgica* 29 (1999): 68–83; Gary Macy, "A Re-evaluation of the Contribution of Thomas Aquinas to the Thirteenth-Century Theology of the Eucharist," in *The Intellectual Climate of the Early University* (Kalamazoo, MI: Western Michigan University, 1997); Josef Pieper, "Of the Goodness of the World," *Orate Fratres* 25 (1951): 433–37; Liam G. Walsh, OP, "Liturgy in the Theology of St. Thomas," *Thomist* 38 (1974): 557–83.

same scholars generally remark on the centrality to Thomas's account of an earnest effort to work out the relation between the signifying and causing aspects of the sacraments.² The importance, moreover, of Thomas's effort, is universally recognized, whether explicitly or tacitly, with approval or demur. The chief aim of this paper, then, will be to elucidate Thomas's understanding of the sacraments, specifically in terms of the complex relationship between sacramental signification and sacramental causality. In the process it is hoped that the importance, and indeed continued relevance, of Thomas's thought will be in some way certified. Finally, I wish to propose a way in which the perennial relevance of the saint's sacramental theology³ may be better appropriated today, in light of contemporary philosophical observations—specifically, the phenomenological perspective of Robert Sokolowski—as well as a final speculative intuition concerning the modern “problem” of hermeneutics.

One possible entrée into St. Thomas's sacramental theology is to consider how he takes up and reworks his sources. This is the approach that will be followed here, focusing on Peter Lombard's discussion of the sacraments in the fourth book of the *Sentences* and, by inevitable extension, acknowledging the more remote source for the thought of both Peter and Thomas, St. Augustine.⁴

That a sacrament is a sign of some sort would appear to be a notion contemporaneous almost with the origin of the concept of “sacrament” itself. Certainly by the High Middle Ages, as one author noted recently, the major sources for Eucharistic thought “emphasized, first, that the risen Lord was truly present in the sacrament and, second, that this presence,

Also worthy of note as belonging to the conciliar milieu, though written slightly earlier, is Colman O'Neill, OP's superbly argued two-part paper, “The Role of the Recipient and Sacramental Signification,” *Thomist* 21 (1958): part I, 257–301; part II, 508–40. Finally, mention should be made of Karl Rahner's “The Theology of the Symbol,” published before the conclusion of Vatican Council II but three years after *Sacrosanctum concilium*, in *Theological Investigations*, vol. 4, *More Recent Writings*, trans. Kevin Smyth (Baltimore: Helicon, 1966), 221–52.

² Cf. *ST* III, q. 62, a. 1, ad 1: “Efficiunt quod figurant” (“They cause what they signify”—so it is typically translated).

³ Not to mention the metaphysical underpinnings of this theological locus.

⁴ In his contribution to *The Intellectual Climate of the Early University* (see note 1 above), Gary Macy remarks: “At the beginning of the [thirteenth] century, the three greatest influences on Eucharistic thought were Hugh of St. Victor in his *De Sacramentis*, Peter Lombard's discussion in the *Sentences*, and Innocent III's *De mysteriis*” (“A Re-evaluation,” 54). Owing to the conspicuousness of the Lombard's opening distinction of book IV as a significant structuring principle for Thomas's account, not less than to constraints of time and space, the current discussion will refrain from consideration of these other two important sources.

though real, was a sacramental presence, a presence *in sign*, accessible only through faith.”⁵ Though the comment here concerns specifically the sign value of the Eucharistic species, the fundamental concept is broader: A sacramental presence—whatever else it may be⁶—is a presence in sign.

Sign is, in fact, *the* key notion in the history of development of the more specific Christian concept of sacrament. Thus, Philipp W. Rosemann observes that

Augustine develops the distinction between things and signs that was to become Peter Lombard’s guidepost in composing the *Book of Sentences*. Scripture contains both things and signs—or, rather, things that do not signify anything else and things that do (and therefore function as signs, all signs being things).⁷

According to Rosemann, this essentially Augustinian logic determines the architectonic structure of Peter’s *Sentences*. Consequently, “The conception of sacraments as signs appropriately places them in the final part of Lombard’s theological system, governed as that is by the Augustinian distinction between things and signs.”⁸ Rosemann cites the transitional passage with which Peter begins his fourth book: “Having treated of those matters which pertain to the doctrine of things that are to be enjoyed [that is, the Trinity], that are to be used [creation in general], and that are to be used and enjoyed [man, the angels, the virtues, and even Christ], we approach the doctrine of signs.”⁹ In passing, we may note the parallel between Peter’s formulation here and that of his teacher, Hugh of

⁵ *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

⁶ The point I hope to make is that we need not, and probably ought not, persist in attempting to reduce our linguistic account of the sacramental mystery to the overwrought tension between “sign” on one hand and “real presence” on the other: these concepts—or better, these realities—are and always have been far richer, more organic, more *living* than the words themselves or many attempts to anatomize them admit. In our now highly eclectic philosophical landscape we have begun to find friends in strange and unexpected corners. With the likes of Peirce, Husserl, and Heidegger looming in the background, the speech-act theorizing of such analytical philosophers as Austin and Alston, the personalism of such Catholic philosophers as Gabriel Marcel, Josef Pieper, and Karol Wojtyła, and the phenomenological project of Robert Sokolowski, have begun to provide new approaches to thinking and speaking about theological reality, including the locus of the sacramental event.

⁷ Philipp W. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 12.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 144.

⁹ “His tractatis quae ad doctrinam rerum pertinent, quibus fruendum est, et quibus utendum est, et quae fruuntur et utuntur, ad doctrinam signorum accedamus.” Cf. *ibid.*

St. Victor, in providing the argument for his own masterwork, *De sacramentis christianae fidei*: “Thus the work of foundation is the creation of the world with all its elements [cf. “things”]. The work of restoration is the Incarnation of the Word with all its sacraments, either those that have existed since the beginning of the world or those that ensue right to the end of the world.”¹⁰ Under the immediate influence, then, of his own theological mentor Hugh, but beholden as well to the more remote yet far more authoritative doctrine set out in the works of St. Augustine,¹¹ Peter Lombard offers a pithy account of the sacraments as a species of things that are not only what they are, but are what they are while at the same time pointing beyond themselves to other things. Such is the Augustinian notion of the sign, of which the sacraments will turn out to be a very particular kind.

Peter devotes the entire fourth book of his *Sentences* to the sacraments. Of this substantial tome, only the opening distinction and the first chapter of the second one—not more than a few pages in translation and even less in folio—deal with sacramental theology in general, after which the rest of the book treats the particular sacraments one by one in all their theological, pastoral, and practical detail. By contrast, St. Thomas’s treatment of the sacraments in general in the *Summa* runs for six whole questions, roughly ten times the length of Peter’s text. The length and intricacy of Thomas’s treatment is, of course, typical of his milieu and the disproportion vis-à-vis Peter’s work is characteristic of the contrast between the twelfth-century genre of the *Sententiae* and the thirteenth-century *quaestio*. Nevertheless, we might flag here, prescinding for the present from any judgment of the scholastic approach per se, a certain inevitable side-effect (collateral damage?) of this striking disparity. Granted the real profundity of Thomas’s far more expansive account of sacramental theology, the general scholastic trend moves inexorably *away* from mystery in favor of ever more explicit *explanation*. Undoubtedly, there are many times when more elucidation of some point of dogma or doctrine is called for, when incomprehension of some locus of the faith begins to generate frustration,

¹⁰ Ibid., 27.

¹¹ Especially *De doctrina christiana*, as far as the foundations of Peter’s understanding of the sign is concerned. Augustine, however, was stylistically and methodologically the antithesis of the medieval schoolman. Thus, Peter, no less than those before or after him, had to cull Augustine’s sacramental insights from throughout his vast work. In his first distinction, Peter’s other crucial explicit reference is from *De civitate Dei*, x (see below). For Thomas’s questions in the *Summa*, among the more important sources besides *De doctrina christiana* are *Contra Faustum* (xix), *Contra Epistolam Parmeniani libri tres* (ii), *In Ioannis evangelium tractatus* (lxxx), and *De civitate Dei* (x).

dissension, or moral complacency. The degree of explanation wanted is, I would argue, neither merely self-evident, nor simply “as far as reason can possibly take us at any given moment.” In this connection, Philipp Rosemann expresses his admiration for Peter Lombard’s reticence in the face of the question *Quid sumit mus?* “What does the mouse receive? What does it eat?” Peter’s slightly acerbic answer: “God knows.”¹² Rosemann contends that the Lombard “achieved an admirable balance between the legitimate claims of reason in coming to understand the mysteries of faith and the humble recognition of the shortcomings of rationality when it is faced with “the foolishness of God [that] is wiser than men”—an awareness that, I think, is always the hallmark of authentic spirituality.”¹³ How far to go in attempting to answer sundry questions, even in determining what questions are to be asked—these are prudential matters; even more, they are matters for the salutary determination of which prudence needs to be informed by genuine faith. But if Peter demurs when it comes to the metaphysical status of the sacred species in the intestines of a rodent, how far does he go in responding to fairly basic questions about how the sacraments function under ordinary circumstances in the life of the Church and the individual believer?

Peter takes his doctrine of the sign, as has already been noted, from Augustine. Correlatively, it is Augustine who provides Peter with his fundamental definition of sacrament, itself a Christian specification of the Augustinian theory of signs. “A sacrament is the sign of a sacred thing [*res*],” says Augustine in the *City of God*.¹⁴ In fact, Thomas quotes the passage more completely and accurately in the *sed contra* of his opening article concerning the sacraments: “The visible sacrifice is the sacrament, that is, the sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice.”¹⁵ The key emphasis at this point in both arguments, however, is on the relation between the visible, tangible, material *sign* on one hand and the invisible, mysterious, *sacred* or *secret* thing on the other. Peter proceeds to distinguish conventional from natural signs and then to identify the sacraments as a particular kind of conventional sign.

What sets a sacrament apart from at least some other conventional signs is the fact that it “bears a resemblance [*similitudo*] to the thing of

¹² *Sentences* 4, dist. 13, ch. 1: “Illud etiam dici sane potest, quod a brutis animalibus corpus Christi non sumitur, etsi videatur. Quid ergo sumit mus, quid manducat? Deus novit.” Cf. Rosemann, *Peter Lombard*, 154.

¹³ Rosemann, *Peter Lombard*, 156.

¹⁴ *De civitate Dei*, x, ch. 5. Cf. *Sentences* 4, dist. 1, ch. 2.

¹⁵ *ST* III, q. 60, a. 1, s.c.: “Sacrificium visibile invisibilis sacrificii sacramentum, idest sacrum signum est.”

which it is a sign. . . . For a sacrament is properly so called because it is a sign of the grace of God and the expression of invisible grace, so that it bears its image and is its cause.”¹⁶ Seemingly out of nowhere, the notion of cause (*causa*) is introduced here for the first time. The strict economy of Peter’s argument would make the point difficult to prove, but there is some suggestion that the sacrament’s causal power is intimately tied to its peculiar quality of resemblance or likeness. The two notions are introduced simultaneously, and Peter makes explicit that it is the sacrament’s *similitudo* to the thing it signifies that distinguishes it from ordinary signs. But Peter appears to explain this distinctive likeness precisely in terms of causal power.¹⁷ In any case, Peter proceeds to confirm more exactly the causal aspect of the proper understanding of the sacrament: “Sacraments, therefore, were not instituted merely in order to signify something, but also as a means of sanctification (which is to say: ‘making holy’).”¹⁸ On these grounds, Peter judges that the ritual observances of the Old Testament were not proper sacraments, “for things which were instituted only to signify are signs only, and not sacraments, such as the sacrifices of flesh and the ceremonial observances of the old law, which could never justify those who offered them.”¹⁹

One of Thomas’s more interesting departures from the Master comes here, albeit a determination more of nuance than of reversal. Wishing to ground the ritual practice of the Church, the people of the New Covenant, in that of Israel, he seeks to uncover the likeness and not just the difference between the two. Thomas is in agreement with Peter and the whole of the Tradition beginning with St. Paul that the “sacraments” of the Old Law could not justify: Only Christ can justify, and Christ had not yet come. Against Peter, however, Thomas reasons carefully as follows:

Sacraments are necessary for man’s salvation, insofar as they are sensible signs of invisible things whereby man is made holy. Now after sin no man can be made holy save through Christ. . . . Therefore before Christ’s coming there was need for some visible signs whereby man

¹⁶ Peter Lombard, *Sentences* IV, dist. 1, ch. 4. Here and in the following passages, unless otherwise noted, I have borrowed the translations of Elizabeth F. Rogers, as found in the appendix of her work titled *Peter Lombard and the Sacramental System* (Merrick: Richwood, 1917, 1976), here at 80.

¹⁷ This question might fruitfully be pursued further in the service of excavating a premodern epistemology far more robustly, even essentially, linked to a realist ontology—at another time and place.

¹⁸ *Sentences* 4, dist. 1, ch. iv. Cf. Rogers, *Peter Lombard*, 80.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

might testify to his faith in the future coming of a Savior. And these signs are called sacraments.²⁰

Several things ought to be noticed about Peter's determination, and about Thomas's development of the thinking of Peter and the Tradition. First of all, it is conspicuous in Peter that the sacraments qua causes, which is to say, the sacraments properly so called, belong strictly to the period of the New Law. Precisely because the ritual of the Old Law did not justify or sanctify—namely, *cause* its practitioners and recipients to be just and holy—its “sacraments” are not properly sacraments at all. They only signify, which makes them less than sacraments.²¹ For Thomas, on the other hand, the sacramental system of the Old Covenant has some legitimate claim to be so designated. His point is not to attribute justificatory or sanctifying power to the Jewish rites per se. Nevertheless, he urges that through faith, a real, ontological link is forged between the sacramental practice (circumcision, sacrifice) of the Old Law and that of the New—a link that in an important way transcends historical bounds. Thus, while the sacraments of the Old Law do not themselves save, they function as *signs of justifying faith*.²² At the same time, Thomas's carefully qualified assessment of the role of the sacraments at different moments in salvation history has the salutary effect, if heeded, of mitigating any account of the sacraments that would gradually supplant their signficatory character with an increasingly physical, and inevitably mechanistic, causality.

This analysis of the contrast between Thomas's and Peter's assessment of the sacraments of the Old Law also tends to undermine an intriguing if rather too simplistic claim made by Gary Macy pertaining to this key transitional period in the history of theological development. Macy argues for a crucial change from Alexander of Hales and all before him, to Albert the Great and Thomas Aquinas. According to Macy, Albert ultimately

²⁰ ST III, q. 61, a. 3, s.c.: “Dicendum quod sacramenta necessaria sunt ad humanam salutem in quantum sunt quaedam sensibilia signa invisibilium rerum quibus homo sanctificatur. Nullus autem sanctificari potest post peccatum nisi per Christum. . . . Et ideo oportebat ante Christi adventum esse quaedam signa visibilia quibus homo fidem suam protestaretur de futuro Salvatoris adventu. Et huiusmodi signa dicuntur sacramenta.”

²¹ Peter concludes *Sentences* IV, dist. 1, ch. 6 (“Of the difference between the old and the new Sacraments”) with another citation from Augustine (*Enarrat. in Ps.* 73, no. 2): “the former only promised and signified salvation, while the latter give it.” Cf. Rogers, *Peter Lombard*, 82.

²² Thomas formulates the matter in these terms with special reference to circumcision. Cf. ST III, q. 62, a. 6, ad 3. Also cf. q. 70, a. 4, for greater detail on Thomas's position.

insists that transubstantiation is the “only acceptable explanation for Eucharistic change”—even granting that this entails the real presence of Christ in, for example, the stomach of a mouse, let alone of an unbeliever.²³ Putting the claim in more stark categorical terms, Macy contends that “with Albert and Thomas, an important shift has taken place. Metaphysics has replaced theology as the explanatory force driving their discussions of the Eucharist.”²⁴ But as we have just seen, the more “metaphysical” concerns of sacramental causality are already plainly evident in the opening distinction of Lombard’s *Sententiae*, even possibly at the cost of a due appraisal of the sacrament’s signficatory value, which is to say, its *meaning*. On the other hand, Thomas’s finely tuned summary of the relation between the sacramental systems of the two Covenants suggests anything but a harsh mechanistic dichotomizing of sign and cause, let alone a preference for the latter as sole “explanatory force.”

A word should be said about what may be the greatest, or at least best known, legacy of the *Sentences* for the history of sacramental theology. This is the famous, or notorious, tripartite distinction among *sacramentum tantum*, *sacramentum et res*, and *res tantum* (or *res et non sacramentum*). The terminology does not arise in the opening distinction on the sacraments in general, but particularly in Peter’s fourth distinction, on baptism, and in the eighth, the first of six distinctions on the Eucharist. Here Peter summarizes neatly:

On the three [elements] that can be distinguished here. For there are three [elements] here that should be distinguished: one, which is the sacrament alone; a second, which is the sacrament and the “thing”; and a third, which is the “thing” and not the sacrament. The sacrament and not the “thing” is the visible appearance of the bread and wine; the sacrament and the “thing” [are] Christ’s proper flesh and blood; the “thing” and not the sacrament [is] his mystical flesh.²⁵

²³ Macy, “A Re-evaluation,” 63. Macy also notes significantly that St. Bonaventure, though a contemporary of St. Thomas, follows his teacher Alexander in this matter.

²⁴ Ibid., 65. Macy concludes his otherwise well-argued paper with an embarrassingly tendentious *ad hominem*. He proposes that the Dominicans’ circumstances—“a revolutionary new order formed to protect a Church under attack” (67)—may have contributed significantly to the strongly metaphysical formulations of Albert and Thomas, that is, over against more “subjectivist” or “spiritual” interpretations by the Franciscans, interpretations that would have given Waldensians and Albigensians more wiggle room. This possibly valid insight would warrant more serious attention if it had been more cautiously circumscribed.

²⁵ *Sentences* IV, dist. viii, ch. 7: “Sunt igitur hic tria distinguenda: unum, quod tantum est Sacramentum; alterum, quod est Sacramentum et res; et tertium, quod est res et non Sacramentum. Sacramentum et non res est species visibilis panis vel vini

As he progresses through the seven sacraments, Peter is able to apply the same language of *res* and *sacramentum*, *mutatis mutandis*, and with various shortfalls in parallelism between one and another application. What is most striking for our current project is the fact that what would later become a mainstay of the manualist tradition in fact makes a fairly modest showing in Thomas's *Summa*. Not that Thomas ignores the Master's distinctions: They are quite useful as the barebones principles for explaining the relationship between a visible, material ritual and its invisible, spiritual effect. As such, he engages them in the *respondeo* of the opening article of his first question on baptism (III, q. 66, a. 1). But the only other place where he evokes them explicitly and as an integral notion is in his reply to the third objection in his first article on the Eucharist (III, q. 73, a. 1, ad 3). And in the six articles of the question devoted to sacramental character where we might expect Peter's language to figure most prominently, it occurs conspicuously only in Thomas's reply to objection 2 of the third article, "Whether the sacramental character is the character of Christ?"²⁶

One more motif from the opening chapters of Peter's first distinction on the sacraments bears mentioning here, inasmuch as Thomas integrates and reworks it in an interesting way. In answer to the question, "Why were the sacraments instituted?" Peter responds, "for a threefold reason: for *humility*, *instruction*, and *exercise*." For each of these three reasons, Peter gives a theological explanation, with the vague hint that he might have a Trinitarian structure in mind, but without executing this notion in any detail. Thomas appropriates Peter's triad in answer to his roughly parallel question (III, q. 61, a. 1), "Whether sacraments are necessary for man's salvation." This is the opening article in his question "Of the necessity of the sacraments," which immediately follows his first question of the treatise, devoted entirely to the sacrament as sign. Rather than develop any latent Trinitarian theme in the Lombard's text at this point, Thomas uses the Master's threesome to shore up the key notion of *materiality* in a proper understanding of the sacraments. He changes Peter's order, placing instruction first. More importantly, where Peter correlates man's need for instruction with the dullness of spiritual sight brought on by the fall, Thomas correlates the need with human nature per se, "which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual

Sacramentum et res caro Christi propria et sanguis; res et non Sacramentum mystica eius caro." I have here borrowed the translation provided by Rosemann (*Peter Lombard*, 152).

²⁶ Cf. ST III, q. 63, a. 3, ad 2.

and intelligible.”²⁷ Conversely, Peter associates the humility intrinsic to true worship with man’s basic condition as an intellectual yet embodied creature, standing on a metaphysical plane somewhere between “insensible things” beneath and angels and the Trinity above. Thomas, in turn, completes the chiasm, directly associating humility with the “healing remedy” for sin provided by the sacraments. It was through sin that man

subjected himself by his affections to corporeal things. . . . Consequently it was fitting that God should provide man with a spiritual medicine by means of certain corporeal signs; for if man were offered spiritual things without a veil, his mind being taken up with the material world would be unable to apply itself to them.²⁸

In the case of exercise, Thomas grants to the Lombard the ascetical applicability of the sacraments as practical “training” against both demons and sinful activity. However, he stresses the compassion implicit in the divine condescension to provide, in the form of the sacraments, a salutary outlet for “bodily exercise,” “lest . . . it should be too hard for man to be drawn away entirely from bodily actions.”²⁹

There is no need to overdraw the contrast between Thomas and Peter here: The Lombard is always “the Master” for Thomas, and his general treatment of sacramental theology is valid and rich, as far as it goes.³⁰ Thomas does, however, intend to go further in his own exposition. For the moment it is enough to notice Thomas’s concern, especially evident at question 61, article 1, to explicate the necessity of the sacraments in terms of man’s condition as an intellectual, but not purely intellectual, creature: an intellectual creature with a body. In the conjunction between question 60 and question 61, article 1, Thomas subtly yet elegantly gestures toward an analogy between the sacraments and the human person: Both man and the sacraments bespeak spiritual realities, materially embodied—which embodiment in all its sensible dimensions is *no less essential* to the fundamental identity and definition of each. This analogy stands behind the *fittingness* of the sacraments themselves as the ordinary means of our salvation in Christ: anticipated in the ritual observance of the Old Law with

²⁷ *ST* III, q. 61, a. 1.

²⁸ *Ibid.* Here, too, Thomas evokes the beautiful opening of Peter’s first distinction, in which he summarizes the traditional allegorical interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan. Cf. also *ST* III, q. 60, a. 6; q. 63, a. 1, s.c., *inter alia*.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ Cf. Edward A. Synan’s article, “Brother Thomas, the Master and the Masters,” in *St. Thomas Aquinas, 1274–1974: Commemorative Studies*, vol. 2 (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Medieval Studies, 1974), 219–42.

all its gory physicality, accomplished by the Son of God through his eminently tangible Passion and death, oriented to the ultimate glorification in heaven of our whole selves, soul and body.³¹

In focusing attention more exclusively now on St. Thomas's own sacramental theology, especially as articulated in questions 60 to 65 of the *tertia pars* of the *Summa theologiae*, it is both fair and useful to ask: Why only the *Summa*? The standard answer, that it is in the *Summa* that we find St. Thomas's most mature thought, is not without merit. However, we may venture one further comment, pertaining directly to our main interest, sacramental causality and signification. In a dissertation completed in the late 1950s, titled *The Instrumental-Dispositive Causality of the Sacraments According to the Early Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas*, Theodore Mackin argues that Thomas developed the concept of dispositive causality in his earlier works mainly to counter the tendency that would make the sacraments *causae sine quibus non* of grace.³² By the time of his writing the *Summa*, Thomas's position had become more nuanced, and dispositive causality had disappeared in favor of a careful explanation of the relation between the principle agent or cause and certain specialized kinds of instrumental causes.³³ Taking Mackin's argument into account, it seems plausible to suggest that Thomas's stress on the sacrament *as sign* in his most authoritative presentation, that of *ST III*, questions 60–65, may be at least partially rooted in a lingering concern to temper the *sine quibus non* position³⁴ with all its mechanistic, potentially even magical, implications. However, by the time he composed these questions, his thought had also fermented and mellowed: He now sought patiently and thoroughly to expound the signficatory nature of the sacraments *first of all*, and *then* to allow their causal aspect its proper, more “modest” place in his account.³⁵

³¹ Cf. *ST III*, q. 61, a. 4, s.c., and especially ad 1; in more general terms of the historical shape of the analogy, cf. q. 60, a. 3, s.c.

³² Especially *De potentia*, *De veritate*, and the *Commentary on the Sentences*. Cf. Theodore Mackin, *The Instrumental-Dispositive Causality of the Sacraments According to the Early Writings of St. Thomas Aquinas: Excerpta ex dissertatione ad Lauream in Facultate Theologica Pontificiae Universitatis Gregoriana* (diss., Pontificia Universitas Gregoriana, 1958), 11. I have drawn mostly from pp. 5–12 of Mackin's excellent introduction.

³³ Cf. *ibid.*, 11.

³⁴ This expression is the signal feature of Franciscan occasionalism.

³⁵ The place, as we shall see, is that of a separate sensible instrument (piecing together Thomas's insistence at *ST III*, q. 60, a. 4, s.c., that “the sacramental signs consist in sensible things” with his explanation of the *instrumentum separatum* at q. 62, a. 5, s.c.). At the same time, as I also hope to show, Thomas's final recorded thoughts on the sacraments reflect a deep appreciation of persons, both human and divine.

That Thomas is deeply concerned with the relation between sign and cause in the sacramental context is evident from the first article of his treatise. The very first objection he chooses to present contends that “a sacrament is a kind of cause rather than a kind of sign.”³⁶ This placement is the kind of masterstroke that evokes stylistic comparisons between Thomas’s *Summa* and the medieval cathedral.³⁷ The cut-and-dried answer to the objection is, of course, that a sacrament is a sign and not a cause. In fact, however, Thomas temporizes in his reply, eschewing *efficient* causality for the moment, but inviting consideration of formal and final causality at this very early juncture of his discussion. Moreover, by strategically fronting the neuralgic issue of causality *simpliciter* in his opening objection and just as promptly rejecting any uncritical identification of the sacraments *as* efficient causes, he simultaneously thematizes and brackets the notion. In his *respondeo* he provides another hint that cause may not have been banished for good when he observes that “a thing may be called a sacrament . . . from having some relationship to this sanctity, which relationship may be that of a cause, or of a sign or of any other relation.”³⁸ At the same moment, he brings *signum* to the fore, concluding his response:

³⁶ “Ergo sacramentum magis est in genere causae quam in genere signi.” *ST* III, q. 60, a. 1, obj. 1.

³⁷ It would be too easy, pursuing the metaphor, to see Thomas’s delicate intertwining of language pertaining principally to sign with language concerned mainly with causality as basically ornamental vis-à-vis the structure of the *Summa* as a whole: a flying buttress or stained glass window, rather than a massive column or even the arch spanning the entrance to some elegant side chapel. In fact, the extraordinary genius of the *Summa* (to say nothing of the mind of St. Thomas!) has everything to do with its integrity or holism: so that if one element is misconstrued, the error sets off reverberations that threaten to obliterate one’s vision of the whole. Conversely, a profound understanding of any part or aspect can generate resonances and harmonies the reader begins to hear echoing through the whole. Such a happy reading is provided in Liam G. Walsh’s superbly crafted essay titled “The Divine and the Human in St. Thomas’s Theology of Sacraments,” in which the author describes St. Thomas’s sacramental theology in its integral relation to the *Summa* as a whole. Walsh is especially attentive, in what might well be termed a phenomenological approach (!) to Thomas’s text, to the careful development of his theological anthropology from the very first question of the *prima pars*, through his moral theology, Christology, and finally his treatment of the sacraments. See Liam G. Walsh, “The Divine and the Human in St. Thomas’s Theology of Sacraments,” in *Ordo sapientiae et amoris: Image et message de Saint Thomas D’Aquin a travers les recentes etudes historiques, hermeneutiques, et doctrinales* (Fribourg: Editions Universitaires Fribourg Suisse, 1993).

³⁸ *ST* III, q. 60, a. 1, c.: “Sacramentum potest aliquid dici, . . . quia habet aliquem ordinem ad hanc sanctitatem, vel causae vel signi vel secundum quamcumque aliam habitudinem.”

"But now we are speaking of sacraments in a special sense, as implying the habitude of sign: and in this way a sacrament is a kind of sign." Having thus identified sign as the *genus* of sacrament, Thomas sets to work immediately to embroider the bare Augustinian description of sacrament as "sign of a sacred thing" into an increasingly more precise and more elaborately reticulated definition.

Already in the *respondeo* of the following article, Thomas makes two new qualifications of sacrament in rapid succession. First, he specifies that a sacrament "properly so called is that which is the sign of some sacred thing *pertaining to man*."³⁹ This small but crucial step forward in the definition follows from the enormously important thesis of St. Thomas's theological anthropology with which he begins his answer: "Signs are given to men, to whom it is proper to discover the unknown by means of the known."⁴⁰ But what is the particular character of this pertinence of the sacramental sign to man? In dialogue with his first interlocutor,⁴¹ Thomas effectively concedes that not all sensible creatures are sacraments, even though all sensible creatures are signs of sacred things. To be sacraments, he explains, it is necessary for the sensible creatures in question to signify holy things not only "inasmuch as these are holy in themselves," but "inasmuch as we are made holy by them." He concludes the brief corpus of his response with the newly adjusted definition of a sacrament as: "the sign of a holy thing, inasmuch as it makes men holy."⁴² In his reply to the third objection, he tweaks this definition once more:⁴³ The

³⁹ ST III, q. 60, a. 2, c, emphasis added.

⁴⁰ "Signa dantur hominibus, quorum est per nota ad ignota pervenire." Ibid. To capitalize on an insight Walsh makes in more general terms regarding a true understanding of Thomas's thought, this dictum, so conspicuously anthropological in its focus, begins with what biblical scholars are in the habit of calling the "theological passive": Signs *are given*. By whom? By God. More striking still is the syntax of Thomas's expression, in which God is the unstated (invisible!) agent of the *main, independent* clause, while man is first the object of this action and second, assumes the status of a relative pronoun in the dependent clause. Cf. Walsh, "The Divine and the Human," 351–52.

⁴¹ ST III, q. 60, a. 2, ad 1.

⁴² Ibid., s.c.: "Signum rei sacrae inquantum est sanctificans homines." St. Thomas's rough and ready Latin is not much help for resolving the infuriating ambiguity over the correct antecedent of "it," the unstated subject of the copula *est*. In the final analysis, it may be a moot point, inasmuch as Thomas will fairly shortly leave no doubt that the sacraments have a certain causal force, properly circumscribed and understood.

⁴³ Perhaps, among other possible reasons, to exclude what we generally refer to today as "sacramentals": cf. "sprinkling with holy water," in the third objection itself.

making holy signified by a sacrament is not bare *sanctificans*, but *perfectio sanctitatis humanae*: the *perfection* of human holiness.⁴⁴

In the next article, Thomas adverts to the classical Aristotelian notion of causality for the first time. Yet the tripartite cause of our sanctification delineated in his answer clearly refers *not* to the sacraments themselves, but to what the sacraments signify. Thus, the cause itself⁴⁵ of our sanctification is Christ's Passion, its form,⁴⁶ grace and the virtues, and its final end,⁴⁷ eternal life. Reformulating the definition from the previous article in more succinct, and technical, terms, Thomas states that a sacrament is "that which is ordained to signify our sanctification."⁴⁸ In article four, he specifies his earlier formulation of "discovering the unknown by means of the known" (q. 60, a. 2) in terms of the Aristotelian doctrine that man acquires "knowledge of the intelligible from the sensible." Consequently, he adds "sensible" to his definition of sacramental sign.⁴⁹ At this point, a sacrament should be said to be "that which is ordained to signify *sensibly* [the perfection of] our sanctification."

⁴⁴ ST III, q. 60, a. 2, ad 3.

⁴⁵ ST III, q. 60, a. 3, c.: "Ipsa causa" (cause itself) manifestly equivalent here to efficient cause, though Thomas chooses not to overemphasize Aristotle's own terms in this case.

⁴⁶ Ibid.: "Forma" (form). Again, the equivalence with formal cause is commonplace, though the word cause is avoided.

⁴⁷ Ibid.: "Ultimus finis" (ultimate end). As with the previous two locutions, Thomas opts against the explicit employment of precise philosophical formulation. Nonetheless, the final end and the final cause are equivalent notions for Thomas.

⁴⁸ "Quod ordinatur ad significandam nostram sanctificationem." Ibid. Note again the use of the theological passive. Though the point should not be pressed too hard, in Thomas's reply to the first objection there is also a curious echo of the notion proposed above of an analogy between the human person and the sacraments. In the immediate context, in which Thomas is clearly concerned to stress the sacrament's nature *as sign*, the parallelism is far from exact. Qua sign, a sacrament is by definition something material: It only *signifies* something spiritual, whereas the human person *is* both spiritual and material in his make-up. Accordingly, the comparison Thomas draws here between man and the sacrament is strictly between, on one hand, the word "man" and the reality it signifies, a composite of body and soul, and, on the other hand, the notion of sacrament, which signifies an interrelated composite of three realities, all spiritual. As we proceed further and deeper into Thomas's account of the sacraments as signs that in fact *effect* what they signify—a notion that seems to demand recognition of a genuinely spiritual element of the sacraments themselves—the congruence between the two elements of the analogy increases. In light of Thomas's sacramental theology as a whole, then, ST III, q. 60, a. 3, ad 1, begins to sound like a playful overture of a theme that gradually develops, resonating in the background as the composer proceeds.

⁴⁹ Cf. ST III, q. 60, a. 4, s.c.

In the following article, Thomas introduces an idea that will become increasingly important in subsequent questions, namely, the notion of the intrinsic dynamism of the sacraments. The sacraments, observes Thomas, are dually oriented: to the worship of God on the one hand and to man's sanctification on the other.⁵⁰ Concerning the worship of God ("which pertains to man as referred to God"), he will have more to say in future questions. As for that which "pertains to God in reference to man," apart from the significant Christological reference in article 3, this is the first time Thomas draws particular attention to the divine personal agent of man's sanctification: It is God who sanctifies us, who institutes and orders the sacraments to that sanctification, who finally "signifies spiritual things to us by means of the sensible things in the sacraments."⁵¹ Thus Thomas's argument has progressed from initial descriptions of sacrament abstracted entirely from personal agency, through the implied ascriptions of agency in articles 2 and 3, to the explicit recognition of the intimate relationship between the sacramental sign and Christ's saving and sanctifying Passion (also in article 3), to a statement of God's own (Trinitarian) agency not only in accomplishing our sanctification and orchestrating the means, but also in signifying those means to us. Where there is a sign, Thomas reminds us pointedly, there is a person who signifies. Though he has yet to speak directly of sacraments as causes, the theo-logic of his response in question 60, article 5, points in a clear direction: God's activity is not only maximally effective, it is also simple and one. If it is fundamentally God who signifies with and through the sacraments, then the sacraments must have causal power—and of the most potent kind, however we may ultimately attempt to grasp the fringes of this mystery in finite human terms. Confident of St. Thomas's approval, we may cite the prophet Isaiah here:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and return not thither but water the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes forth from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and prosper in the thing for which I sent it (Is. 55:10–11)

But what else are "the sensible things in the sacraments," if not specially privileged words going forth from God's mouth, by means of which he "signifies spiritual things to us"? Consonant with this line of thought, the

⁵⁰ *ST* III, q. 60, a. 5, s.c.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, ad 1. Cf. the s.c.

final three articles of question 60 inquire in some detail into the human expression of the divine signifiers we designate sacraments.

In question 61 Thomas remains predominantly concerned with the sacrament as sign, paying increasing attention to that sign's Christological content as he proceeds. We have already discussed the first and third articles at some length in our comparison with Peter Lombard. One further point may be made here: In the fourth and final article of the question, Thomas states bluntly in his reply to the second objection that "our sacraments"—as opposed to those of the Old Law—"both contain and cause grace."⁵² Thus, he has set the stage to take up more deliberately the problem of sacramental causality. Such is the stated concern of the whole of question 62.

Thomas begins his response in question 62, article 1: "We must say that in some way the sacraments of the New Law cause grace."⁵³ It may be hard to resist, upon an initial reading, accusing Thomas of second-guessing himself. As has been noted, in the earliest articles of his sacramental discussion, Thomas pressed the significatory nature of the sacraments so hard that their causal—hence, ontological—force might have seemed to be in jeopardy. Indeed, he even seemed inclined at one point to deny the sacraments any efficient causality whatsoever.⁵⁴ Yet St. Thomas's theological project is all about nuance, fittingness—ultimately, the *elegance* of the Truth. As I have attempted to demonstrate to some extent in this discussion, the *order* of the questions is important. Within a question, the order of articles is important. Within an article, even the order of objections is often significant. To return, then, to an observation made in intentionally fairly naive terms above, in the first objection of the first article of his sacramental treatise, Thomas puts as starkly as possible the contrast between sign and cause. This sharp either/or, for everyone who is used to reading and hearing *quaestiones* in thirteenth-century Paris, points merely to an initial privileging of the sign value of the sacrament and only the *apparent* exclusion of any causal content. Accordingly, Thomas pointedly relativizes his working definition of sacrament *qua sign* several times in the opening articles with the qualification: "as we are speaking of it *now*."⁵⁵ What Thomas aims to do at the outset of his discussion is to

⁵² ST III, q. 61, a. 4, ad 2: "Nostra autem sacramenta gratiam continent et causant."

⁵³ ST III, q. 62, a. 1: "Dicendum quod necesse est dicere sacramenta novae legis per aliquem modum gratiam causare."

⁵⁴ Recall ST III, q. 60, a. 1, ad 1, where he aligns the sacraments with formal and final *over against* efficient causality.

⁵⁵ Cf. ST III, q. 60, a. 1, emphasis added: "Specialiter autem nunc loquimur"; q. 60, a. 1, ad 3: "Non eadem ratione qua nunc loquimur de sacramentis"; q. 60, a. 2, c.: "Secundum quod nunc de sacramentis loquimur."

rule out the strong position that the sacraments are nothing but independent causal powers, a position that inevitably eclipses the whole notion of sacramental *sign*. In the end, as has been hinted already and will be seen more clearly as we proceed, the perceived tension between the signficatory and causal aspects of the sacrament is resolved through recourse to a higher perspective, that of the person who both signifies and causes through the sacraments.

From Thomas's first response of question 62, we learn at last, and all at once, that a sacrament is an instrumental cause of grace, operating "not by the power of its own form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent: so that the effect is not likened to the instrument but to the principal agent."⁵⁶ Against those who would argue that the sacraments are merely the *occasions* of grace,⁵⁷ Thomas adduces "the authority of many saints that the sacraments of the New Law not only signify, but also *cause* grace."⁵⁸ Yet as regards the principal cause, "none but God can cause grace, since grace is nothing else than a participated likeness of the Divine Nature."⁵⁹ Thomas solves the puzzle by distinguishing two aspects or components of efficient causality, the principal and the instrumental causes. Thus, while God is always the sole principal cause of grace in the soul, He appoints the sacraments as the necessary vehicles, or instruments, of that grace. By divine ordination, the sacraments are not only signs, but real instrumental causes in the soul of the "participated likeness of the Divine Nature" we call grace. It is now possible for Thomas to show that a sacrament, as an instrumental cause, "is not merely a cause but also in a measure an effect, insofar as it is moved by the principal agent. And in this sense the sacraments of the New Law are both causes and signs."⁶⁰ Impatient contemporaries of St. Thomas may have waited long for the moment, so meticulously prepared

⁵⁶ *ST* III, q. 62, a. 1: "Causa vero instrumentalis non agit per virtutem suae formae, sed solum per motum quo movetur a principali agente. Unde effectus non assimilatur instrumento, sed principali agenti."

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*: "Insofar as God causes grace in the soul when the sacraments are employed." Thomas employs an ablative absolute here, plainly imputing to these opponents the total removal of the sacraments from the divine grace-infusing action: "Sed quia Deus, sacramentis adhibitis, in anima gratiam operatur."

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*: "Cum tamen ex multis Sanctorum auctoritatibus habeatur quod sacramenta novae legis non solum significant, sed causant gratiam."

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*: "Et hoc modo non potest causare gratiam nisi Deus, quia gratia nihil est aliud quam quaedam participata similitudo divinae naturae."

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, ad 1: "Non solum est causa, sed quodammodo effectus, inquantum movetur a principali agente. Et secundum hoc sacramenta novae legis simul sunt causae et signa."

for, when the *magister* can finally affirm “the common expression, ‘they effect what they signify.’”⁶¹ Summarizing his argument, Thomas observes that the sacraments of the New Law “perfectly fulfill the conditions of a sacrament, being ordained to something sacred [namely, grace], not only in the mode of a sign, but also in the mode of a cause.”⁶² Thomas’s now finely honed definition of a sacrament lacks only one more significant specification to be essentially complete and serviceable to the enterprise of sacramental theology at large. It remains only to distinguish the instrumental causality of the sacraments from that of Christ’s human nature. In the fifth article of question 62, he explains that a sacrament is a *separate* instrument of the divine grace-giving action. Christ’s human nature, on the other hand, conjoined or united as it is to his divine nature, constitutes what Thomas calls the “conjoined instrument” of that same action.

Many scholars of the late twentieth century have displayed a prejudice against St. Thomas’s sacramental theology, often no doubt in consequence of “reading” Thomas through the manualists. Less excusable is the not uncommon and sometimes willful misreading of Thomas himself. One of the main forms such careless and unfriendly [mis]reading has taken is the charge, more or less subtle, that Thomas’s account of sacramental causality is mechanistic, either forfeiting something that was readily to be found in the patristic period, or, in some more stringent criticisms, accelerating a downward spiral already in place with St. Augustine.⁶³ Yet, even when, in question 62 and following, Thomas has opened wide the portals, as it were, to the language of causality, contrary to the common rationalistic modern misreading he never allows this language to reduce the realities in question to mere mechanism, much less to magic: An instrumental cause may or may not itself be a person. Neither animate nor inanimate

⁶¹ Ibid.: “Et inde est quod, sicut communiter dicitur, efficient quod figurant.” With this lapidary traditional formula carefully vindicated, Thomas arguably concludes the central movement of his general sacramental theology.

⁶² Ibid.: “Ex quo etiam patet quod habent perfecte rationem sacramenti, inquantum ordinantur ad aliquid sacrum, non solum per modum signi, sed etiam per modum causae.”

⁶³ We have noted the general charge already in Macy (“A Re-evaluation”). For a reading that prefers Augustinian typology and holism to Thomistic distinctions and stasis (!?), see Peter Leithart, “Christ’s Christened into Christ,” 68–83, esp. 82–83. J. A. Appleyard goes further. Dismissing the Augustinian matrix of signification theory as intrinsically flawed, he includes St. Thomas in a school of thought that would ascribe “a great if mysterious power to words themselves, or, at any rate, is deliberately not excluding such a possibility from among the many not fully understood consequences of the transformation of experience into symbols.” See Appleyard, “How Does a Sacrament,” 186–87.

instrument can operate, however, without being moved by some principal agent. And this principal agent is always a person. Hence, the instrumental causality attributed to the sacraments is always rooted first in the divine will, second in the human will of Christ.⁶⁴ Last, and no less personally, there are the extrinsic animate instrumental causes contributed by the wills of the human ministers⁶⁵ and recipients.⁶⁶ Such is St. Thomas's sacramental "mechanics," though the term ought surely to be jettisoned once the reality it purports to designate is properly understood. In his carefully constructed account of the sacraments, instead of a mechanics Thomas offers a penetrating narrative of two free wills, divine and human. In terms no less precise than mystical, St. Thomas's sacramental theology resolves itself in the end into a reverent description of the mysterious interpersonal dynamics of the relation between God and the Christian believer.⁶⁷

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A brief word may now be ventured about the prospects of appropriation of St. Thomas's doctrine today. Two kinds of projects are especially prominent from the mid- to late twentieth century. First, there are the myriad dissertations that have come out of Rome and pontifical faculties elsewhere, many of them by Dominicans or Jesuits, that seek to expound St. Thomas on his own terms in the most excruciating detail, typically in almost exclusive conversation with the self-consciously Thomistic theological tradition.⁶⁸ Many of these are paragons of serious scholarship and some reflect profound and even original insight. Even the best of them,

⁶⁴ Whose human excellence qualified him supremely to administer the sacraments of our sanctification, which sacraments he himself instituted in virtue of his divinity. Cf. *ST* III, q. 64, aa. 2–4.

⁶⁵ Cf. esp. *ST* III, q. 64, a. 1, s.c.

⁶⁶ Cf. *ST* III, q. 68, a. 7, s.c.

⁶⁷ Cf. O'Neill, who argues that the movement of free will, which constitutes "the proximate disposition for justification (in adults), . . . involves, on the part of the intellect, faith, on the part of the will, an act of desire for God which is a true act of charity and contrition. It is an important element of St. Thomas's teaching, as understood by the majority of Thomists, that this act is dependent, as on an efficient cause, on the grace for which it is the disposition, or material cause. It is by this act of free will, proceeding wholly under the movement of God, that an adult is formally justified as a person." "The Role of the Recipient," 509–10.

⁶⁸ Cf. the works of Mackin, *The Instrumental-Dispositive Causality*; Peter B. Garland, *The Definition of Sacrament According to Saint Thomas* (Ottawa: The University of Ottawa Press, 1959); and Charles B. Crowley, *A Defense of the Common Thomistic Teaching on Sacramental Grace* (Rome: Pontificium Institutum "Angelicum," 1947).

however, run the risk of self-banishment to one of the most rarefied of academic ghettos, where in general they avoid entirely the urgent need to make Thomas accessible to the members of the living Body of Christ. There is a second group of authors whose projects are essentially critical. It is, of course, intellectually legitimate *in principle* to criticize St. Thomas. However, he is, it need hardly be said, a formidable adversary. Perhaps not surprisingly, then, these critical projects are often tendentious, when they are not simply inferior.⁶⁹

A third, more diffuse category is comprised by the far smaller number of authors who possess a genuine appreciation for the breadth and depth of St. Thomas's genius, who go to great lengths to take him seriously on his own terms, and yet who believe that such genius ought at all events to be engaged in dialogue from every corner of the contemporary theological (not to mention philosophical!) conversation. Such are the works of Colman O'Neill and Liam Walsh, which have been cited in this paper. Walsh's most recent work is particularly interesting as a segue into what might qualify as a distinct fourth candidate for consideration of how St. Thomas's thought might or might not be appropriated. In his 1993 article titled "The Divine and the Human in St. Thomas's Theology of Sacraments," Walsh argues persuasively that Thomas's own theological enterprise can be characterized both as profoundly *hermeneutical* and as *phenomenological*.⁷⁰ The project I wish to consider now, in the briefest of terms, is that of Robert Sokolowski. Like Walsh, Sokolowski seeks to engage theological questions in phenomenological terms. Unlike Walsh, Sokolowski is not a Thomist, at least not in the quasi-technical sense in which that

⁶⁹ The projects of Macy ("A Re-evaluation"), Leithart ("Christs Christened into Christ"), and Appleyard ("How Does a Sacrament") have been remarked, all of which, in my judgment, fall into this category, albeit to varying degrees and in different ways.

⁷⁰ Cf. Walsh, "The Divine and the Human," esp. 323, 326, 327, and 329–30. Given the skill of the writer, as well as his evident approval of St. Thomas's theological method, there is at least a strong hint that Walsh would incline to construe his own theological project in the same terms. Consider, for example, his contrasting of two ways of doing theology at the outset of his article and his stated intention to follow the "case history" approach (as opposed to one that is more "head-on," and "theoretical"), whereby "one can examine a particular area of theology, and even the work of an individual theologian in that area, to see how the reality of the divine and of the human is affirmed there. One can bring to light the epistemological position underlying that piece of theology and test it by its results" (321). Consider also his claim to have looked "in hermeneutical and even phenomenological terms at what Thomas has to say about *sacra doctrina* in the first question of the *Summa* (327, no. 18).

description tends to be used in the circles of academic theology and philosophy today.

Sokolowski's most sustained attempt to apply phenomenological categories and principles to theological questions is found in his book titled *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure*. There, Sokolowski eschews the name "phenomenological theology" on aesthetic grounds, remarking dryly that it "chokes every sentence in which it appears." He toys with "theology of manifestation," but in the end opts for "theology of disclosure." It should be pointed out immediately that Sokolowski makes no particular effort to engage St. Thomas in a systematic way, either in this work or elsewhere; presumably he has no interest in doing so. Certainly Thomas is cited, and not infrequently. Sokolowski's interest, however, is otherwise engaged. Here, of course, he differs from Walsh, whether more by temperament or because of contrasting philosophical presuppositions. Nevertheless, we find a high degree of concurrence between the two men with reference not only to most points of fundamental theology, but also regarding the basic soundness of a classical Aristotelian-Thomistic metaphysics. What Sokolowski effectively does, in contradistinction to the Dominican Walsh, is to *accept* the traditional, essentially Thomistic account of sacramental signification and, more especially, causality as a given. With his phenomenological analysis he helps to situate and *integrate* the sacraments within a broader, organic, ecclesiological, and spiritual whole. He does not merely avoid or sidestep the long-running debates and disputes. Rather, he chooses positively not to engage in them, as if in tacit recognition that they have, at worst, missed the point entirely and, at least, unnecessarily exacerbated tensions that might resolve themselves if located within a wider horizon. In describing his own project, Sokolowski writes:

The theology of disclosure should also be seen as a positive reflective activity. There are many themes that can be explored by this way of thinking: the way language functions in both Scripture and the sacraments, the way both words and grammar are adjusted in Christian discourse to allow for analogy, the manner in which Christian religious action differs from simply ethical conduct. All the particular issues in theology depend, however, on a central issue of disclosure, on the new perspective on the world that is introduced in Christianity. All the particular issues presuppose the Christian distinction between world and God, the new understanding of the divine that is introduced in biblical belief. They all presuppose this background belief, but they each also add nuances and dimensions to it. All these issues are, of course, also studied in ontological theology, but they can be clarified in another way by

phenomenological reflection. The examination of how they come to light helps to bring out their nature and helps make clear what they are.⁷¹

In an article which appeared in *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* in 1995, Sokolowski shows how “this way of thinking” has profoundly affected his own understanding of how both priest and congregation experience the Eucharistic liturgy. I will cite just two examples. Early in his article, Sokolowski articulates one of his key themes, employing deftly some of the classical phenomenological language he has inherited from Husserl: “The one sacrifice of Christ is presented through a structured manifold of appearances: as anticipated by Jesus and as remembered and reenacted by the Church.”⁷² A few pages on, as he examines what is disclosed in the elevation of host and chalice, Sokolowski specifies a significant aspect of this presentation of Christ in structured manifold. He writes:

This reverence toward the presence of Christ, however, can take on a deeper meaning if the elevation is seen also as a presentation of the consecrated bread and wine to the eternal Father. . . . The bread and wine are profiled against the eternal Eucharist between the Son and the Father, and we are allowed to glorify and participate in that sacred exchange.

The language of presence, of course, finds strong echoes in the Tradition. Sokolowski deliberately evokes this traditional language within the phenomenological lexicon of manifolds and profiling, presentation and appearance, presence, absence, givenness, and horizon. In doing so, he is able to consider the Mass in more holistic terms and to outwit the modern (Cartesian) enslavement to syllogistic linearity in favor of a more global engagement of the realities he considers.

In a second case, the deeply personalistic stamp of Sokolowski’s theology of disclosure shines forth brightly. As in the case of the summary description of his project above, a slightly longer citation is necessary to appreciate the flow of Sokolowski’s thought in this regard. As he rounds out his phenomenological reflection on the Mass, he focuses on the central importance of the recitation of the Our Father as a vital participation by all the faithful in ratifying and giving ourselves over to the sacramental event. He writes:

⁷¹ Robert Sokolowski, *Eucharistic Presence: A Study in the Theology of Disclosure* (Washington, DC: The Catholic University of America Press, 1994), 193–94.

⁷² Robert Sokolowski, “Praying the Canon of the Mass,” *Homiletic & Pastoral Review* 95 (1995): 9.

The Our Father is also said from within a special context, one that is different from the context of the Eucharistic Prayer. The setting for the Eucharistic Prayer was provided by the Preface and Sanctus, which placed us among the angels and saints. The context for the Our Father is set by the sacramental presence of Christ in the community of the Church on earth. Now that Christ has become present among us in the sacrament, we are able—we are emboldened—to call God our Father; the previous uses of the term “Father,” in the Preface and Canon, would have referred primarily to him as Father within the Holy Trinity and as the origin of all things. The context for the Our Father, set by the presence of Christ among us as our savior and brother, is contrasted with the celestial context set earlier by the Preface and Sanctus. After the Great Amen we return to earth, so to speak, to the place of the Incarnation, with Christ now sacramentally present with us, and we begin to prepare for our individual communion with him by reciting the prayer he taught us to say.⁷³

Liam Walsh contends that “what people were doing and thought they were doing in their practice of *ea quae pertinent ad christianam religionem*, is being examined”—by St. Thomas—“in what one might well call a *phenomenological* way. The reality of a given human experience is being *disclosed* in the light of the whole *horizon* of principles, theological and anthropological, that Thomas has been working on throughout the *Summa*.”⁷⁴ I suggest that the great truths St. Thomas employed the medieval *quaestio* so effectively to elucidate are being further illuminated according to a surprisingly analogous methodology, albeit in very different language and form, by Robert Sokolowski in his theology of disclosure.

In closing, I wish to offer a brief, hopeful rejoinder to those who allege a hermeneutical crisis of Christian theological, if not all human discourse.⁷⁵ I would propose that the thought of St. Thomas, of Robert Sokolowski, of the teaching office of the Church—indeed that of the *sensus fidelium* itself—converge in something like the following intuition regarding the Christian sacraments: The sacraments are maximally indefeasible acts of meaning, of personal communication. They are therefore fundamentally hermeneutically foolproof. This is very different from any mechanistic explanation because the reliability of meaning resides not in a mechanism, but in persons—primarily, the three Divine Persons as institutors,

⁷³ Ibid., 15.

⁷⁴ Walsh, “The Divine and the Human,” 330, emphasis added.

⁷⁵ I should note that I readily concur in this diagnosis, both in specifically Christian and more broadly human and humanitarian terms. However, I also believe that many of those who protest this crisis most vociferously persist in contributing far more to the problem than to any resolution.

initiators, and guarantors, and secondarily, human persons in their willing reception of these divine self-communications. Where there is “room” for “interpretation,” as it turns out, is in the efficacy or fruitfulness of the sacraments, inasmuch as the magnitude and quality of the effect of a sacrament in the recipient are a function of the degree of his “understanding,” in the richest sense,⁷⁶ of the sacramental reality signified—which reality is Christ. N V

⁷⁶ Subjectively, not objectively, which is to say, as a function of an understanding that elevates and assumes and transforms the individual from within, and *not* especially as a function of the extensiveness, or even intensiveness, of the propositional content of his theological acumen.