

**Archive, Anamnesis, & A Real-Beyond-Presence in the  
Eucharistic Liturgy**

Keegan Osinski

Vanderbilt University

Abstract

The purpose and goal of the liturgy and of those participating in it is *making space*. Space for welcome, for hospitality, for movement, for freedom, for lament, for exultation. Space for absence, certainly; space for presence, perhaps. Without the presence of the people, the presence of elements, expectantly returning to the self-defeating, being-toward-death archive of the liturgy, we cannot experience the Real-beyond-presence we may encounter in Christ there. What I am proposing is that there is a deep interweaving of dependencies at work in the Eucharistic liturgy and the possibility of Real-beyond-presence therein: the text of liturgy, a model of the archive, is necessary as the holding place for forgetting in order to enact the anamnesis—remembrance that requires forgetting. The remembrance requires an absence, an opening, a khora. And it is in this absence, seen in the broken bread and the poured out cup, that we may, perhaps, encounter a Real-beyond-presence.

Many people go to church on Sunday to experience something. They want to meet with God, to feel God's presence, to come face to face with the divine. But what if the purpose of liturgy is not to provide people with passwords or lead them in a series of incantations that will allow access to a divine throne room? What if the purpose of liturgy is to break down the door and find that the throne is empty?

Rather than a ritual proffering certainty and presence—a surefire entrée of God into a room, into a loaf—I'd like to reframe Eucharistic liturgy as a repeated exposure to absence, a faithful, fearful embrace of the unknown impossible possibility of a Real beyond real presence.<sup>1</sup> This reframing can affect the actual structure and experience of the liturgy—changing the ways in which we partake of the elements, as well as how we think of the elements. We may change the layout of a sanctuary or the layout of a service to create the necessary space for the Real within.

Within a typical liturgy—the gathering of the assembly, the speaking of words, the breaking of bread, the receiving of elements—we are given opportunities to engage this absence, and in fact, as will become apparent in this paper, this absence is an integral part of the function of the liturgy and the liturgy itself. Of particular interest in the Eucharistic prayer is anamnesis, which is the remembrance of Jesus and his institution of the sacrament (Luke 22:19). So central is the anamnesis that many church altars and tables are emblazoned with Jesus' words: "This do in remembrance of me." It is on this remembrance that I wish to focus. Rather than instantiating a presence, anamnesis necessitates an absence. And this absence—which may be seen as a kind of *khora*, a non-place space, perhaps—is where we may encounter the Real.<sup>2</sup> The absence necessitated by the anamnesis in the Eucharistic liturgy is the *khoratic mise en abyme*<sup>3</sup> that allows for the possibility of the singular event of the Real beyond presence.<sup>4</sup>

The word and action of anamnesis denotes remembering, recalling, bringing forth the past. However, for this re-call to occur, one must first face, identify, and call out the past's absence. In a sense, the first step of remembering is forgetting. One may not remember that which has never been forgotten; one may not re-member that which has never been torn asunder. Bruce Morrill says that "the only way one can grasp the past is by way of negation."<sup>5</sup> Past events must be instantiated by their identification as not-now, not-here, not-present before they can be ushered into the now, here, present. The memory holds within itself the absence of memory—the forgetting, the loneliness, the nonexistence. When the priest/officiant calls forth the memory of Christ, she is simultaneously acknowledging the lack—the need for remembrance, that is, the forgetting, the absence.

Anamnesis "explores the meanings of a given 'present,' of an expression of the here and now, without immediate concern for (referential) reality."<sup>6</sup> We re-express the past in "the here and now," not as nostalgic play-acting, but as a confrontation with lack, with change, and an invitation for the story and person of Christ to re-enter the scene. To borrow Freud's illustration of his grandson's bobbin, Christ was, at one time, there (*da*) and now is absent (*fort*). And yet, in a sense, he is always still there, behind the bed, though not in the sense of ontological object permanence, but in the presence of the bodies, of the body, of the Church. And so the repetition of the weekly liturgy,

remembering, re-mem-bering, the re-forgotten and scattered body, continues to call back that absent presence—*da, fort, da, fort, da*. It is the “repetition alternatively of its presence and its loss,” its persistence “even in its absence” that constitutes the thing.<sup>7</sup> And in order for Christ’s presence to be recalled in the Eucharist, its absence must be identified. When we remember Christ’s life and death and resurrection on Sunday, our ability to do so is due, in part, to the fact that we forget it during the week. On Sunday, the dispersed and fragmented body of Christ re-gathers, and in the liturgy, at the table, is re-mem-bered.

It is not uncommon to think of memory as an archive—a kind of organized, categorized safety deposit box in our mind—but the way Derrida conceives of archive deconstructs such common notions. The archive is not a place to store safely artifacts of meaning, but a place in which the artifacts—and their meanings also—are lost. The archive is external and requires we give our memories away, leaving us bereft, and forcing us to return to the archive in order to remember what we’ve forgotten. Derrida asserts that

If there is no archive without consignment in an external place which assures the possibility of memorization, of repetition, of reproduction, or of reimpression, then we must also remember that repetition itself, the logic of repetition, indeed the repetition compulsion, remains, according to Freud, indissociable from the death drive. And thus from destruction... The archive always works, and a priori, against itself.<sup>8</sup>

Use of the archive is an absurd being-toward-death, a repeated forgetting-on-purpose and re-remembering only to forget again. We archive things—memories, perhaps—in order to remember them, while in truth the archive actually allows and encourages us to forget. The remembrance only occurs after we have forgotten and return to the archive to be reminded.

Liturgy acts as this archive, this external locus allowing, encouraging, providing the framework for the repetition of loss and thus remembrance. Because of its external materiality, Derrida asserts that the archive is hypomnesic (using static, external memory) rather than anamnetic (flowing, internal remembrance). But liturgy can be understood in both ways: it is a text—external from the people—but it is also internal—enacted *by* and *in* the people. The anamnetic ritual of the church brings forward this archived, external memory of the Christ, performs this function toward death, this death-drive repeated ritual of remembrance. A remembrance of (Christ’s) death, a remembrance toward (our own) death, in order to give way to resurrection—though this is not guaranteed.

Further, the liturgy as archive functions as a kind of loss. As its purpose is to help us remember, it indeed encourages us to forget. It is permission to forget. The entrusting of memory to the external place is a letting go, a giving up. It is a supplement to memory, but also its undoing. It requires us to forget. The archive—the liturgy—“will never be either memory or anamnesis as spontaneous, alive and internal experience. On the contrary: the archive takes place at the place of originary and structural breakdown of the said memory.”<sup>9</sup> The liturgy itself is not anamnesis. It is not the memory, the remembrance, but it is the breakdown, the locus of the absence from where

the memory may emerge. The anamnesis may take place in the bodies of individuals (though always a collective of individuals, the church) within the framework of the liturgy. But the liturgy as archive is a necessary extension for the introduction of forgetting. The necessary forgetting for the remembrance.

Just as forgetting is required for remembrance, real absence is required for real presence, or a Real-beyond-presence. The repeated text of liturgy gives way to an opening up of the gap—it is not what enacts a presence, as a kind of magic spell, but it is that which creates space, or perhaps acknowledges the space already there, out of which a presence may flow. When we speak of the somatic efficacy of the words of institution, it is not in the sense of an *ex nihilo* creation or conjuring, but rather a recalling of a body broken, a body absent. The priests/officiants and the people “have no control over any mechanism that may bring about an effective anamnesis.”<sup>10</sup>

And yet, while human action is indeed integral to the celebration and the enacting of the anamnestic liturgy, it is always in a dialectical balance with the unknown, the uncontrollable, the unenacted entropy of the impossibly possible.<sup>11</sup> Bruce Morrill writes, “Reflecting in this way on the liturgical action of remembering by no means implies that the anamnestic enactment of the paschal mystery can be reduced to the human processes of memory.”<sup>12</sup> Morrill would likely assert, along with Karl Rahner and Thomas Aquinas, that the missing piece, that the nonhuman power of enactment, belongs to God—God’s power, God’s grace. But I would posit that the missing piece is the event itself—its chance, its probability, inexorably linked to its perhaps-not. That which finally and ultimately enacts the possible event of the Real-beyond-presence of Jesus Christ in the Eucharist is simultaneously that which may not appear there. Such is the capricious nature of the event—it cannot be coerced, cannot be replicated, cannot be supplied on-demand.

In her poem “Time does not bring relief; you all have lied,” Edna St. Vincent Millay illustrates the possibility of absence to birth, through memory, a presence:

There are a hundred places where I fear  
To go,—so with his memory they brim.  
And entering with relief some quiet place  
Where never fell his foot or shone his face  
I say, “There is no memory of him here!”  
And so stand stricken, so remembering him.<sup>13</sup>

It is the fact of her love’s not-being-there, the lack of memory that substantiates him in that space. It is the gap that renders him present. Likewise, the gap exposed by the ritual anamnesis, by the forgetting and remembering of the gathering of the people, by the breaking of the bread, the pouring out of the cup, is the possible birthplace of the impossible. It is the non-place space where the anachronistic presence—a Real-beyond-presence—of Jesus Christ may appear. Simone Weil demonstrates this as well in her *Gravity and Grace*: “The presence of the dead person is imaginary,

but his absence is very real; henceforward it is his way of appearing.”<sup>14</sup> While here she says that the presence is imaginary, the fact that the absence is real, and that in this real absence the person may really appear, suggests that this presence is not *un-real*.

Edith Wyschogrod says that “the past is always already hyperreal, volatilized, awaiting only the technological instantiation it has now received.”<sup>15</sup> The sacramental elements of the Eucharist are the “technology” used to instantiate this present-absence/absent-presence, this Real-beyond-presence that is absence, of Christ. The determination of the “reality” of a thing cannot be its ontological weight. If I may conflate *reality* and *truth* for a moment, Louis-Marie Chauvet says that “truth can be produced only by consenting to this absence which constitutes it.”<sup>16</sup> He explains that the subject can only interact with the Truth (or perhaps the Real, perhaps a Real-beyond-presence) “in the consent to the absence of the Thing.”<sup>17</sup> He identifies “lack-in-being,” the presence of absence, “not as an inevitable evil but as the very place where its life is lived.”<sup>18</sup> The pregnant emptiness we may encounter in the khoratic opening is the locus of the possibility of life—the possibility of a Real-beyond-presence.

The necessity of liturgy in the calling out of this possible event cannot be minimized. Certainly, the event of Real-beyond-presence is governed by the impossible, the unpredictable, however it is crucial to identify the distinction between the *unpredictable* and the *unexpected*. The Church is always living in expectation of the appearance of Christ. The laying out of the table each week is the proclamation of Christ’s death until he comes—the opening of an absence to welcome the impossible possibility of his coming. This event is “expected and ardently wished for. But it is an event in that the subject giving birth to it does not know, cannot analyze and does not control.”<sup>19</sup> We may not make the horse drink, but we can lead it to water.

The possibility of the event of a Real-beyond-presence, calling from within the ritual, within the elements, to which we call back “viens, oui oui,” like Lyotard’s “Thing, that which preoccupies art and writing... ‘commands’, but it makes no demand.”<sup>20</sup> Following John Caputo, we might say it *insists*.<sup>21</sup> And it insists from within the liturgy of the Eucharist, the gathering to a meal.

In the breaking of the bread, a khoratic space opens up. In the kenosis of Christ, the breaking of his body, and the communal brokenness of the bodies of the Church, the anachronistic khoratic non-being non-place opens up. This space is not a receptacle to be filled (why is it always our inclination to fill what is empty?), but rather a kind of yonic interstice from which something may—or may not!—emerge. The work of the Church, the work of the liturgy, like the work of Lyotard’s painter, is to “keep open the passage through which may come what has not yet come.”<sup>22</sup> The liturgy is a weekly reopening of the space, a methodic rupturing of the everyday, where we engage with the symbolic sacramental elements that clear out space. It is a place set for Elijah, facing us with the emptiness of the presence of the absence of God and inviting us to enter in, allowing the absence to consume us as we consume the elements that speak of that absence. In the consuming-being-consumed of the Eucharistic ritual, the khoratic space we have discussed becomes a part of our bodies.

The body is the locus of the liturgy. It is the topos where all of this being and non-being, this presence and absence, this possible and impossible event *actually* may take place. Chauvet says that the eucharistic ritual *must* be “veri-fied in an *existential* memory whose place is none other than the believers’ bodies.”<sup>23</sup> While the event we hope for, the Real-beyond-presence is indeed *beyond* presence, we still may experience it in our own material reality. This event is “the ultra-real or hyper-real that insinuates itself into what passes itself off for reality.”<sup>24</sup> The Real-beyond-presence can meet us *here* in some way. The anamnesis—the liturgical encounter of absence and calling “*Viens*,”—is, at bottom, a material function of the body. We engage the liturgy in bodies, as bodies, encountering other bodies, the elements entering into and disbursing within our bodies.

The purpose and goal of the liturgy and of those participating in it is *making space*. Space for welcome, for hospitality, for movement, for freedom, for lament, for exultation. Space for absence, certainly, presence, perhaps. Without the presence of the people, the presence of elements, expectantly returning to the self-defeating, being-toward-death archive of the liturgy, there is no possibility of the encounter of life—the Real-beyond-presence we may encounter in Christ. What I am proposing is that there is a deep interweaving of dependencies at work in the Eucharistic liturgy and the possibility of Real-beyond-presence therein: the text of liturgy, a model of the archive, is necessary as the holding place for forgetting in order to enact the anamnesis—remembrance that requires forgetting. The remembrance requires an absence, an opening, a khora. And it is in this absence, seen in the broken bread and the poured out cup, that we may, perhaps, encounter a Real-beyond-presence. The practical possibilities to practice and experience this kind of encounter are many and varied. Indeed, it is in the play of experimental liturgies that we can open up the necessary absence, the space for forgetting. We can upend or invert our usual practices in order to disrupt or retune our focus toward parts of the ritual we may have forgotten. We can serve Eucharist in a circle, which is constituted by the absence at the center. We can insert periods of silence into the order of service. If we identify anamnesis as central to the Eucharist, we must imagine creative ways to create the space for absence and forgetting to make way for the recall of the Real therein.

## Notes

---

**1** I use “Real” along the lines of, though not directly in line with, Jacques Lacan’s “register” of the Real, as opposed to the Imaginary and the Symbolic. See Lacan’s *Seminars* from the 1960s and 1970s.

**2** Drawing from Plato’s *Timeus*, Derrida’s khora signifies a vacuous space prior to the binaries of presence/absence. See Jacques Derrida, “Khora,” *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. Ian McLeod (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1995), 89-130.

**3** One of Derrida’s descriptions of khora is “the opening of a place ‘in’ which everything would, at the same time,

---

come to take *place* and be reflected (for these are images which are inscribed there).” See Jacques Derrida, “Khora,” *On the Name*, ed. Thomas Dutoit, trans. Ian McLeod (Stanford, California, Stanford University Press, 1995) 104. *Mis en abyme* describes a self-reflexive, internal reduplication that can be a characteristic of khora in that the khora is somehow beyond and also “holds” its negation within itself. See “Mis En Abyme,” *Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory*, eds. David Herman, Manfred Jahn, and Marie-Laure Ryan (London, Routledge 2010)

**4** See John D. Caputo, *The Weakness of God* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006) and Jacques Derrida, *Without Alibi*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

**5** Morrill, Bruce T, “Time, Absence, and Otherness: Divine-Human Paradoxes Bonding Liturgy and Ethics,” in *Sacraments: Revelation of the Humanity of God*, ed. Philippe Bordeyne and Bruce T. Morrill (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2008), 147.

**6** Jean-Francois Lyotard, “Anamnesis: Of the Visible,” *Theory, Culture & Society* 21, no. 1 (2004): 108.

**7** *Ibid.*, 114.

**8** Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever*, trans. Eric Prenowitz (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11-12.

**9** *Ibid.*, 11.

**10** Richard J Ginn, *The Present and the Past: A Study of Anamnesis* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1989), 63.

**11** See Jacques Derrida, “Sauf le nom,” *On the Name*, 33-88.

**12** Morrill, “Time, Absence, and Otherness,” 147, 150.

**13** Edna St. Vincent Millay, *Collected Sonnets* (New York: Harper & Row, 1941), 2.

**14** Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Emma Crawford and Mario von der Ruhr (London: Routledge, 2002), 68.

**15** Edith Wyschogrod, *An Ethics of Remembering* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 166.

**16** Louis-Marie Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, trans. Madeliene M. Beaumont and Patrick S.J. Madigan (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994), 98.

**17** *Ibid.*, 99.

**18** *Ibid.*, 99.

**19** Lyotard, “Anamnesis: Of the Visible,” 107.

**20** *Ibid.*, 111.

**21** See John D. Caputo, *The Insistence of God* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2013).

**22** *Ibid.*, 107.

**23** Chauvet, *Symbol and Sacrament*, 260-261.

**24** Caputo, *The Insistence of God*, 7.