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Merleau-Ponty and Sacramental Gesture

Vincent Wargo

In this article, we utilize Merleau-Ponty's notions of gesture, flesh and reversibility as philosophical tools to explicate the corporal reality of ritual, incarnation, sacramental presence and the church as the mystical body of Christ. The phenomenological investigation of bodily gesture provides a foundation to elucidate the meaning of symbolic presence from which we compare Merleau-Ponty's notion of the flesh with that of the patristic fathers, leading finally to its ecclesiological interpretation.

Sacramental words and gesture are not simply the embodiment of some thought. Like tangible things, they are themselves the carriers of meaning, which is inseparable from the material form. They do not evoke the idea of God: they are the vehicle of His presence and action. In the last analysis the soul is so little to be separated from the body that it will carry a radiant double of its temporal body into eternity.

—*Merleau-Ponty, Faith and Good Faith (1946)*

Now that the theological turn in phenomenology is under full sway, it is an appropriate time to re-examine Merleau-Ponty's thought in the light of what it can contribute to the further development of this field. It is strange that, like most phenomenologists of his time, Merleau-Ponty did not consider his thought overtly Christian or even necessarily theological in character. Yet, because of the emphasis that Merleau-Ponty places on perception, body and expression along with his original explorations concerning reversibility and the intertwining of the invisible and visible, his thought offers us the tools to investigate both sacramental presence and ritual gesture. Merleau-Ponty's thought provides an opening to see the importance of human bodily existence within the event of revelation and the importance of liturgical celebration. This paper seeks to show how Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological ontology affords us a philosophical basis for understanding sacramental presence, the incarnation and the church as the mystical body of Christ. For the most part, we will work in tandem between Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology and Christian theology. Beginning with the idea that our assent to the faith involves a judgment about the character of the witness, we try to show how gesture expresses



the character of the person. Next, it will be demonstrated why language for Merleau-Ponty, as a system of signs, is dependent upon the being of an incarnate subject and the expressiveness of linguistic gesture. Similarly, we sketch out how traditional theology from Augustine to Aquinas has tried to understand the symbolic nature of the sacraments within the difference between natural and conventional signs and how these are related to the connaturality of the human person. All of this is presupposed on the patristic account of the flesh as the mystical unity of the historical Christ and his church. We suggest how Merleau-Ponty's notions of reversibility and the flesh could be used to understand the ecclesiology of the church as the mystical body of Christ. Finally, we compare Merleau-Ponty's notion of gesture, flesh and reversibility with the position of Jean-Luc Marion as expressing the fullness of symbolic presence.

Let us begin by looking at the example of faith itself. In his *Grammar of Assent*, John Henry Newman argues that religious faith proceeds, interestingly enough, by a sort of judgment. In order to accept the truth of the faith, the believer must freely judge it to be true or to be so. Yet, traditionally, what believers are called to judge is not so much the content of revelation, of which we have only a quasi-idea, since this is what in principle exceeds human understanding, but instead, the character of the witness. Usually we think of this in terms of the scripture or religious text being true, based on the integrity of the apostolic witness. However, if Christ himself is the Divine Logos, then he, in his person, is the revelation and he is also the witness. From this perspective a subtle yet profound change takes place: the revelation now becomes an incarnation and the visible and tangible world is the place of incarnation, the coiling of the visible with the invisible.¹ We enter upon an essentially symbolic order. God is revealed not in an idea or law but in his very person, in his flesh. Our bodily presence to one another then becomes primary for the revelation.

¹We might say in the language of phenomenology that the incarnation is not only the "what" but also the Heideggerian "how" of Christian reflection and activity. French theologian Jean-Pierre Manigne suggests this possibility but articulates it in a vocabulary closer to Merleau-Ponty's when he writes:

If the incarnation is indeed the mystery in which the Word—"he who was from the beginning"—"came to dwell amongst us," we may suggest, as one of the chief "marks" of this mystery, its character of mediation between the highest transcendence and the closest familiarity . . . this co-existence is visible and tangible. We remember the opening of 1 John—the basis of our message, our evidence, is not an intuition, an illumination, a common spirit, an idea of God or a worldly ideology, but rather a life which was touched, heard and seen; eternal life became a face, the mortal and risen body of Jesus of Nazareth.

This is to say, the possibility of the Church's existence and mission begins with a person. As a result of this, the style both of the Church's assemblies and the mission to the world cannot be immaterial. The incarnation does not simply determine the content or meaning of this assembly and their mission—it also determines their mode.

See "The Poetics of Faith in the Liturgy" in *Liturgical Experience of Faith*, ed. Herman Schmidt and David Power (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973).

When Christ declares that he and the father are one, this, again, is something that, as believers, one cannot judge in an adequate fashion. But what we can begin to judge are his gestures, and the gospels, if nothing else, are the account of Christ's gestures. When, at the Last Supper, he breaks bread and says, "This is my body," one accepts this, in the first instance, not for the reason that we understand the doctrine of transubstantiation, but because the gesture and words seem fitting or right. Merleau-Ponty explains how this occurs: words and gesture are never assumed under some ideal significance for a spectator; instead, the words take up the gesture and gesture takes up the words in such a way that they interconnect through the medium of the body, because the body itself is a system of equivalences and transposition from one sense to another.² For Merleau-Ponty it is our bodily life in the world that gives us the means to understand why Christ's or any ritualistic gestures seem fitting and how we can trust them. Because Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology places primacy on the perceptual life, it not only anticipates the importance of ritual gesture in its expressive meaning but can also be called upon to understand the significance of sacramental presence, ritual and festivity in general.

The foundation for this runs deep in the structure of Merleau-Ponty's thought. Sense perception is itself spoken of by Merleau-Ponty as "literally a form of communion" in the sense of a kind of sacramental presence because it intends a real being.³ Hence, perceptual faith for Merleau-Ponty seeks to remain at the level of perception and does not retreat to the immanence of consciousness or reflection; it does not seek to replace what he calls "sacramental presence" with an idea or representation of it. Likewise, faith has its own perception: believers, participating in the rituals, embrace the actual gestures of Christ and not their ideal meaning because the gesture embodies a transcendent presence beyond mere idea. Ritual and Sacraments are the corporality of faith, but they can also be the stumbling block or barrier to every Gnosticism and to every imaginary direct, individual interior or illuminist contact with Christ.⁴ In Christianity the original gestures of Christ are collected to form the sacramental life of the Church, which both preserves and repeats these gestures in its worship and celebration. The Eucharistic celebration, which is central to Christian worship, is itself a ritualistic enactment of these gestures.

In considering the liturgical form of sacramental presence, we can take our first clue from language itself and from common usage: liturgies are not merely watched or attended like baseball games or operas but are said

²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge, 1996), 234–235.

³Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 212–213.

⁴Louis-Marie Chauvet, utilizing Jacques Lacan's distinction between symbolic and imaginary, makes the point that sacraments, being symbolic, are an objective and intersubjective reality, i.e., a flesh, while the Lacanian imaginary, not being objective, is essentially individual and esoteric in character. The Gnostic desire to have secret knowledge or illuminations can be understood as the desire for an imaginary that can never be realized.

to be celebrated. By engaging its participants, the performance of religious rituals both establishes and transforms meaning and experience for their participants along with enabling their reflection upon that experience.⁵ Every liturgy, at its heart, has the character of a feast, something affirmed and done for its own sake, and because of this, liturgies are essentially eventful in nature. They are in some sense an "Advent of meaning" in the language of Merleau-Ponty. Liturgies are celebrated by calling upon God's presence, and we do this by remembering the gestures that Christ enacted. In fact, the liturgy of the mass is centered upon the re-enactment of Christ's gestures at the last supper as he anticipates his sacrifice on the cross. These gestures, along with his words, invoke his bodily presence so that the event of the Eucharistic celebration consists in the manifestation of Christ through his gestures. Karl Rahner writes, "The sacramental action too has the character of a word, it designates something, it expresses something, it reveals something that is of itself hidden."⁶ It accomplishes this because the expressive, symbolic nature of liturgy, its language and gestures, are understood to be performative in character.⁷

For Merleau-Ponty the expressivity of gesture becomes the paradigm for the expressive nature of all communication. Inspired by Saussure, Merleau-Ponty asserts that language can be essentially productive in meaning and he distinguishes the speaking word (*le langage parlant*) as language which creates itself in expressive acts from the spoken word (*le langage parlé*) as an already instituted form of meaning in language.⁸ Merleau-Ponty argues that before language can be understood as an instituted form of meaning, language must first make significations exist as guideposts by establishing them at the intersection of linguistic gestures as that which, by common consent, the gesture reveals.⁹ Hence, the body as gesture is necessary to bridge the gap between linguistic and pre-linguistic phases. This means that world and mind essentially overlap in the lived body for Merleau-Ponty. Or as theologian Louis-Marie Chauvet writes, "For every person, the body is the place in which the most internal and the most external meet or the external place where the internal finds

⁵Bruce Kapferer, "Performance and the Structuring of Meaning" in *The Anthropology of Experience*, ed. Victor W. Turner and Edward M. Bruner (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986), 194.

⁶Karl Rahner, "The Word and the Eucharist" in *Theological Investigations* Vol. IV (New York: Crossroads, 1982), 266

⁷Jean Ladrière, "The Performativity of Liturgical Language," in *Liturgical Experience of Faith*. Although Ladrière takes his inspiration from analytical philosophy, especially the thought of John Searle, it is still pertinent to what Merleau-Ponty says about gesture. Ladrière argues: "The performative verb is not a description of the attitude which its enunciation presupposes; its function is not to indicate the existence of this attitude, but is, so to speak, the attitude itself: it makes it exist in the effective manner by virtue of the illocutionary act underlying its enunciation."

⁸Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, trans. John O'Neil (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973), 10.

⁹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Signs*, trans. Richard G. McCleary (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 42.

its structure. Such a structure is 'symbolic.'¹⁰ As symbolic, gestures must be understood not merely as the communication of ideas or inner states, but instead as visible, creative expressions of embodied life. They are what they signify. Merleau-Ponty not only wholeheartedly agrees with this statement, but he amplifies it, writing that, for human beings, every perception, every action is primordial expression.¹¹ When confronted with an angry face or gesture, he writes, "the gesture doesn't make me think of anger, it is anger itself."¹² Interestingly enough, this is exactly the function of a symbol over a sign as understood by the tradition. In a similar way, the performance of a sacramental gesture doesn't merely make the believer think of Christ, but makes Christ physically present to them. Sacramental gestures, like all gestures, have the capacity to embody personal presence because they are what they signify. On the level of the body alone, the way we walk, whether with a fast gait or a slow saunter, discloses who we are. Even at a relatively far distance away, where we cannot distinguish our friend visually, we can recognize his or her particular way of moving. Moreover, our friends become present to us and we recognize them in their particular gestures. We may even seek to provoke certain gestures from our friends in order to enjoy their reaction. In connection with this idea, consider the account of the Road to Emmaus in Luke's Gospel. Along the way to the town of Emmaus, Jesus appears to two of his followers. They discuss recent happenings in Jerusalem and, starting with Moses and the prophets, Jesus interprets the sacred Scriptures concerning his coming. But still their eyes were kept from recognizing him and it is only when they stop for the evening, and gather around table that they recognize him in the breaking of the bread, i.e., in the Eucharistic gesture.

The study of ritualistic gesture itself proposes interesting questions to the phenomenological theme of absence and presence. Normally, gestures are one's own; they are the bodily kinetic emanations of the individual to which they belong: gesture is the dynamic manifestation of the overall presence of that person. But in sacramental or ritual gesture, the individual gesture is not a "possession" of the person performing it. There is, indeed, a double absence within this presence. First there is the absence of the one whose gesture it is. A ritualistic action may well employ gestures that are part of the office of the one who administers these rites. The question arises whether all rites employ actions that have historical basis in the community and thus direct us to some original situation wherein they were enacted. The second kind of absence pertains when I mimic or impersonate the actions of another: insofar as the other is recognized in my portrayal, then I have to some extent receded. The better my mimicry,

¹⁰Louis-Marie Chauvet, *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 20.

¹¹Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 78.

¹²Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 184.

the more the other appears in my flesh. Within rituals there is absence as well as presence, so that religious rituals can be viewed as memorial services. But they are not memorial services in the way the Veterans Day parades commemorate veterans, or in the way a photograph reminds one of the person pictured therein. These deal with the intentionality of signs and pictures, with which Husserl himself has more than adequately dealt. Yet, what is enacted in ritual is symbolically present and open to a kind of perception. Thus, different rules seem to apply. As Goethe once said, the symbol is the thing without being the thing—yet in spite of that, the thing.¹³

Strangely enough, the congruence between Merleau-Ponty's thought and Sacramental theology only grows the further we investigate the subject. Both lead to an assertion of something like the reality of the flesh. In order to understand this outcome, we need to recognize how their two trajectories mirror one another. For example, M. C. Dillon suggests that Merleau-Ponty's theory of expressive language offers a viable third alternative between the distinction of natural and conventional signs.¹⁴ If language is conceived as linguistic gesture, then the role of words, as signs, cannot function as entirely arbitrary constructs of meaning, nor can they be reducible to the *onomatopoeia* of natural sounds. Both of these assumptions are problematic, since the first begs the question of how meaning could ever be instituted while the second denies that fact of a plurality of languages. Alternatively, Merleau-Ponty proposes that all perception and expression takes place within the human person's incarnate being in the world. He writes:

I become involved in things with my body, they co-exist with me as an incarnate subject, and this life among things has nothing in common with the elaboration of scientifically conceived objects. In the same way, I do not understand the gestures of others by some act of intellectual interpretation; communication between consciousnesses is not based on some common meaning of their respective experiences, for it is equally the basis of that meaning. The act by which I lend myself such a spectacle must be recognized as irreducible to anything else.¹⁵

While the body is certainly the medium of both perception and expression, these are not reduced to the biology or anatomical organization of the body in a purely mechanistic way. Communication through gesture is not simply given, but instead understood as something "recaptured on the part of the spectator." Gestures are understood and communicated through a kind of reciprocity of my intentions and gestures with those of others, so much so that Merleau-Ponty speaks of the gesture of the other

¹³Tzvetan Todorov, *Theories du Symbole* (Paris: Seuil, 1977), 239.

¹⁴M. C. Dillon, *Merleau-Ponty's Ontology* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 187.

¹⁵Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 185.

as coming to inhabit my body and mine theirs.¹⁶ To understand the reciprocity between one's gesture and those of another, one has to work out certain equivalences. And here is where Merleau-Ponty draws a broad analogy between gesture and art. Painting, as essentially expressive in nature, is the working out of these equivalences of the visible that are the human person's bodily relation to the world. Van Gogh's painting "Wheat-field with Crows" is not simply representing these birds in flight, but is showing what still must be done to restore the encounter between what he calls the glance and the things which solicit it.¹⁷ Whatever the visual style of a particular painter, this is his manner of gesture, i.e., the characteristic motion or interaction with the world which determines his vision. So it is not the object which draws movement from the eyes; instead it is our eyes, in the how of their glance, which characterizes shapes and carves out space that gives us an object. A great artist makes this expressive in his work so that even the master forger doesn't make a "fake" as much as he does a study in the style of another. It is our glances, for Merleau-Ponty, in their synergy, their exploration and prospecting, which bring immanent objects to focus.¹⁸ We would not see anything clearly if the eye did not focus in this manner, nor could the mind in any way anticipate a field of objects as if it were working out a calculation. The visible world given to us in expressive gesture "undertakes on its own account to delineate what it intends and makes it appear outside, [it] retrieves the world in order to remake it in order to know it."¹⁹

Merleau-Ponty argues that we recognize the gestures of others because their bodily existence and the things they regard are never pure objects for us. What this means is that the presence of the other is not an object for absolute consciousness, but is rather, in the first place, an object for a perceptual act. This difference is important since objects constructed in consciousness tend to exclude one another, just asthetic acts exclude each other. For example, the conception of my consciousness as self-conscious, Husserl argues, must necessarily exclude the presence of the consciousness of others, but Merleau-Ponty sees that this is not so for perception. In contrast, visual fields don't exclude one another; rather they overlap each other, since the whole of me is not given to myself through pure consciousness but through interaction of my body in the world, as Merleau-Ponty has thematized through his examination of painting. This means that the other "slips" into my visual field, not on the side of an object, but closer to me, on my side, in the locale where my body is given to me reversibly as being both an object and subject in the world. This means that the other appears to me as oriented to the same world as I am. The goal for Merleau-Ponty is "to awaken a carnal relation to the world and

¹⁶Ibid.

¹⁷Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 65.

¹⁸Ibid., 78.

¹⁹Ibid.

the other that is not an accident intruding from the outside upon a pure subject . . . or a concept of experience among others but our first insertion into the world and into truth."²⁰ This relation of reversibility is at the basis of understanding gesture and the ontological structure of experience for Merleau-Ponty.

Similarly, Christian theology has, from Augustine onwards, thought of the sacraments as signs either as *sacrum signum* or *verbum visibile* (sacred sign or visible word).²¹ Here what is emphasized is the visible and sensible character of the manifestation of what is sacred. Christian theology has also faced the challenge of understanding the symbolic nature of sacraments within the difference between natural and conventional signs. Thomas Aquinas, who further developed Augustine's doctrine on the sacraments, distinguished the material from the formal aspects of the sacramental sign. Again, following a similar logic, Aquinas argues that while the material aspect of the sacraments (water, chrism, bread, wine and actions like washing and eating) are not indifferent to the sacramental sign and do contain a signifying force (*vim significandi*), they are nevertheless ambiguous enough in nature not to perfectly express the true nature of the sacrament. Water, for example, from its natural qualities can be a symbol for washing and drinking. It is the formal aspect of the sacrament, the words of institution, which provides the needed criterion to stop the ambiguity.²² Thus, the words and actions of Christ are ultimately expressive. This does not imply for Aquinas that the material incarnate being of the sacrament is superfluous. Quite the opposite: the physical-sensible reality of sacraments is necessary for the salvation of the person. St. Thomas writes,

Sacraments are necessary unto man's salvation for three reasons. The first is taken from the condition of human nature which is such that it has to be led by things corporeal and sensible to things spiritual and intelligible. Now it belongs to Divine providence to provide for each one according as its condition requires. Divine wisdom, therefore, fittingly provides man with means of salvation, in the shape of corporeal and sensible signs that are called sacraments.

The second reason is taken from the state of man who in sinning subjected himself by his affections to corporeal things. Now the healing remedy should be given to a man so as to reach the part affected by disease. 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.

²⁰Ibid., 139.

²¹Kenan B. Osbourne OFM, *Sacramental Theology: A General Introduction* (Mahwah, New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1988), 24.

²²St. Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, bilingual edition Blackfriars, (New York: MacGraw Hill, 1975), III, 60, 6.

The third reason is taken from the fact that man is prone to direct his activity chiefly towards material things. Lest, therefore, it should be too hard for man to be drawn away entirely from bodily actions, bodily exercise was offered to him in the sacraments, by which he might be trained to avoid superstitious practices, consisting in the worship of demons, and all manner of harmful action, consisting in sinful deeds.²³

Fundamental to understanding Aquinas's answer is his insistence that the means of salvation be ordered to the actual existence and nature of human beings. Aquinas's notion of Connaturality is pivotal in grasping how human beings are capable of understanding, acting and living in the world.²⁴ Connaturality suggests an ontological foundation, an "intertwining" in other words, of man in the natural world that reaches into the depth of his being. Thus, the whole of man's incarnate existence, his being in the world and his life with others, becomes the place for the working out of his salvation. Sacraments are one part of a greater mosaic of salvation for Aquinas. The Sacraments are seen as extensions of Christ's mystical body so that Christ himself in his incarnate bodily existence is the original sacrament of encounter with God. The Church understood as the mystical body of Christ, through its liturgy, is a further member of this same bodily presence. The early patristic fathers like Ignatius of Antioch, writing against the Docetists, spoke of this reality in terms of the "flesh" which should not merely be understood as the physical body of Christ, but as an integral matrix for the true appearance (givenness in being) of Christ and salvation. In other words, the fact of Jesus's bodily corporeal existence carries with it a facticity which has theological implications. The "flesh" for Ignatius unites the body of Christ in an original temporality which links him back to the history of Israel and its covenant with God, forward to the soteriological end of man, and finally in the present, through to the operative works of the Church as mystical body through its prayer and sacraments.²⁵ Urs Von Balthasar develops this idea of the Church fathers

²³Ibid., III, 61, 1 c.

²⁴Connaturality is present both in the intellectual, moral and spiritual orders as the natural aptitude, affinity or sympathy of human beings for certain actions and ways of comprehending things. For example, because human beings are hyle-morphic, composites their minds have a natural inclination, stemming from their very operation, to know material beings easier than immaterial being. In the moral order, because of concupiscence, humans are naturally inclined to the pleasant over the arduous. In the spiritual order, it will consist in how graces to be bestowed upon them are in relation to their natural moral virtues.

²⁵Docetism provides any phenomenological approach to theology with a truly interesting foil, since it basically asserts that Christ's bodily existence was sheer illusion or mere appearance, derived from the Gnostic opposition of spirit and matter. Thus, the meaning and reality of incarnation, crucifixion and salvation become radically altered or destroyed. The opinions of the Docetists seemed to vary: Christ either had no physical body or was an Aeon indwelling in a body; his crucifixion was either only the appearance of suffering or where the body of another was substituted for his. Because of this, Ignatius of Antioch used the expression "flesh and Spirit" forty times in his Letters to signify the two orders in Christ and his opposition to this heresy. The following are some of the most important examples to show the range of meaning for the term "flesh": "Submit to the bishops and each other's rights, just as did Jesus Christ in the flesh to the Father, and the apostles did to Christ and the Father and

when he speaks of the spousal relation of Christ to the church as one of flesh. Here it is interesting to note that when Merleau-Ponty describes the unity of culture, the event and advent of meaning, he describes it in the manner of a body because this unity not only extends to individual members but realizes itself in a characteristically unique movement and style which is metaphorically bodily in character.²⁶ In medieval theology the status of the flesh became elevated so that it was held to be eternally assumed by the Word. This simply means that the flesh is an intimate aspect of the essence of the eternal Word or Logos. In the economy of salvation, for Aquinas, Christ acts as both priest and mediator between God and his people, a relationship, for Aquinas, which reaches in both directions. Essential to this relationship is the unity of Christ's actions deriving from the unity of his existence as both God and man. When Christ acts, his human nature is instrumentally linked to his divine person so that the resulting act is sacramental. However, what is decisive for Aquinas is that Christ acts as mediator, not so much as He is God, but insofar as He is a person of human nature.²⁷

Next, I would like to look at the notion of the flesh in Merleau-Ponty's ontology as an important way of unpacking the theology of Sacraments. Along with this, I would also like to suggest how Merleau-Ponty's account with its emphasis on concrete bodily life has advantages over other phenomenological accounts such as those of Jean-Luc Marion. In order to understand how this is possible, we need to go back to the notion of revelation as incarnation, where the body, in the words of Louis-Marie Chauvet, is the arch-symbol for revelation, the place for the living out and the intertwining of cosmic, social and historical dimensions of ritual. These insights are echoed in Merleau-Ponty's own thought when he writes that the body is not just one expressive space among others, but rather "it is the origin of the rest, expressive movement itself, that which causes them to begin to exist as things, under our hands and eyes."²⁸ Merleau-Ponty's approach could be useful in avoiding the hard opposition of revelation to reason as two mutually exclusive spheres because it suggests that the visible in its visibility is the place for the invisible. This insight suggests that

the Spirit so there may be oneness of flesh and of spirit" (Magnesians); "Take up the practice, then, of a kind of forbearance and renew yourselves in faith which is the Flesh of the Lord, and, in love which is Blood of Jesus Christ" (Trallians); "Bread of God is what I desire; that is, the Flesh of Jesus Christ, who was of the seed of David, and for my drink I desire His Blood, that is incorruptible love" (Romans); "He is really of the line of David according to the flesh. . . . Immediately they touched Him and, through contact with His Flesh and Spirit, believed" (Smyrneans). See *The Epistles of St. Clement of Rome and St. Ignatius of Antioch*, Vol. I Ancient Christian Writers, trans. James Kleist S. J. (New York: Paulist Press, 1946).

²⁶Merleau-Ponty, *The Prose of the World*, 81.

²⁷In *Summa Theologiae*, III, 26, a. 2, Aquinas writes, "Now the fact of being an intermediary implies being set apart from both extremes; while, in order to bring these together the mediator bears what belongs to one over to the other. Neither of these elements is realized in Christ as God, but exclusively in so far as he is man."

²⁸Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, 146.

much of the ground-work for the idea of “saturated phenomena” need not take place. I believe what motivates Marion’s approach, as he suggests in his writings on the sacraments, is the need for there to be a logos of the Logos.²⁹ But would this not shift us into an account that would be more logocentric in nature, to some degree emphasizing and separating the spiritual from the carnal by employing a more Husserlian immanent account of perception? Merleau-Ponty’s contributions to the study of perception as well as of language and gesture bind body and mind in a primordial unity where ritual, prayer and liturgical action become inherently meaningful.

From the beginning, the world as flesh is structured according to potential lines of force which we discover only in our perceptual life; gesture finds its foundation in the flesh of the world by exploiting the visibility of the visible. For example, even before the infant understands the smile which it attempts to mimic, it has already to some degree recognized that it has been addressed. The consciousness of the infant is turned to some degree outward to meet the world. Psychologists have shown that all expression or language has the character of it being addressed to us.³⁰ This means that there is a directionality and reversibility to our being in the world. Heidegger refers to something like this directionality and reversibility when he writes that Dasein’s being in the world is always a matter of its concern or *Sorge*. In his essay “The Child’s Relation to Others,” Merleau-Ponty describes an idea of being which utilizes a relational structure.

For Merleau-Ponty it is the thickness of the flesh between the seer and thing which constitutes the visibility of things as well as the corporality of the seer. The flesh is not an obstacle but the very means of communication.³¹ Similarly in the “Eye and Mind,” he speaks of seeing the tiles on the bottom of a pool: the pool’s water has its own characteristic thickness made up of its shimmering surface, reflections and ripples yet it remains the medium by which I see the tiles.³² To pretend that the pool’s water was merely a distortion which could be separated from what it reveals is no longer to see the pool as it really is but to inject within the visible some ideal structure. This sort of attitude is important for theology because it seeks to understand faith in the midst of the concreteness of lived relationship in the world. As an ontological principle, the flesh is not constituted out of matter or mind or substance, but is the intertwining or the coiling of the visible with itself. Merleau-Ponty reminds us that the human body is a sensible for itself: it is color that sees itself and surface that touches itself

²⁹Jean-Luc Marion, *God Without Being: Hors-Texte*, trans. Thomas A. Carlson (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1991), 143.

³⁰Paul Bloom, *How Children Learn the Meanings of Words* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 62.

³¹Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and Invisible*, trans. Alphonso Lingis (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 135.

³²Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Primacy of Perception*, ed. James Eddie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 182.

and as such it allows each of us to sense and to draw close to everything which is itself sensible. This onto-genesis of our body is the overlapping of these two-dimensions of the sentient and the sensible which in turn provides a depth in our access to things. The thickness of the flesh is first brought to light in the experience of this reversibility. The flesh of the world is founded on the reversibility of relations of touch to the tangible, and seeing to the visible and vision to touch. The hand that touches can itself be an object of touch, the seer can be seen. Yet, when the left hand touches the right hand there is no perfect coincidence between the two, the world intervenes. The world is given in the relation of the sentient body to itself.

For theology, Merleau-Ponty's reversibility thesis, along with the notions of visibility and invisibility, provides a fecund ground of possibility by showing the way we can proceed from phenomenon to ontology. On the level of perception, we can certainly think of the reversibility of the vision and touch which a sacrament or even an idol offers, so that the holy enters the economy of the world. Yet, at a deeper level, the reversibility thesis can be helpful for understanding the mystical structure of the Church and how it is constituted in its ritual action and liturgy. The reality of the flesh opens the way for the grounding of anthropologies beyond structuralism to an anthro-socio-ontology where primitive or at least pre-modern vision and visibility can hold sway.

To see how reversibility and flesh play a vital role in manifesting the reality of Christian theology and ecclesiology, we begin much as Merleau-Ponty does with notions of the visible and invisible and how the invisible is "in" the visible as an inner framework (*membreure*), but this time given in the parable of the branches and the vine in the gospel of John. In this parable Jesus declares that he is in his followers and they are in him as the vine is in the branches and the branches in the vine. There is in this bond a living reciprocal relation, not only between Christ and his disciples, but to God as well, insofar as Christ is the servant of the Father (John 15:10).³³ We discover that the invisibility of the "in" is the abiding of love, *agape* specifically, which is so intimate that it can be understood only in reference to the abiding relation of Jesus to the Father which, in the language of Merleau-Ponty, is *Nichturpräsentierbar* (unpresentable) and can itself only be disclosed to visibility in the relation of Christ to the disciples. So visibility becomes the presentation of the invisible. The effect of this mutual abiding love is the building up of the Christian community to such a degree, says Jean-Marie Tillard, that to stand apart from this love is to stand outside the original *agape* of the Father and Son in which one must abide to be a disciple. "If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love, just as [*kathōs*], I have kept the father's commandments and abide in his love." So by the very fact of being united with Christ, believers are

³³J. M. R. Tillard, *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, trans. Madeleine Beaumont (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2001), 15.

incorporated into his Church and no longer live for themselves but for the Lord and for their neighbor.³⁴ This example could be re-inscribed into the ontology of the flesh as an instance of the *Einfühlung* (empathy) where, instead of the perceiving-perceived, we have the loving-loved reciprocity of the love relation that creates a body, a flesh, which is shared and cared for by a community of believers.

The reversibility thesis, however, enters more deeply into the flesh of the Church. The insight of Paul is that there is a mysterious correspondence between the body given at the Eucharistic celebration and the ecclesial body of Christ. Jean-Marie Tillard shows quite clearly how this insight is taken up and further developed by Augustine, John Chrysostom and Cyril of Antioch. The ritual breaking of bread and sharing of a cup symbolized to those present their shared consciousness in their common destiny. Augustine teaches that the Church itself is offered in the offering it makes to God. He asserts this because, at a deeper level, he realizes that there is an indissoluble unity between the mystical body of Christ in the sacraments and the ecclesial body of the church. John Chrysostom sheds some light on this unity when he speaks of the metaphor of the two altars. The altar of stone upon which the Eucharist is celebrated builds up and establishes the ecclesial body of the Church, which becomes the altar of sacrifice that is pleasing to God. This means that the gesture of the Church's self-offering is the reversal of the self-offering of the Eucharistic gesture, and with this the flesh as a spiritual reality becomes realized. According to John Chrysostom, because Christ lives and abides in the members of the ecclesial body, he is most honored in those deeds where members of the community are cared for, especially the poor, the sick and the aged. On the altar of the ecclesial body, which is the Church's service to the poor, a reversal again appears; "What you do for the least of my brethren you do for me (Matthew 25:40)"; Christ emerges as the object of liturgical sacrifice. John Chrysostom proclaims:

What profit is there if Christ's table is set with golden cups but he dies from hunger? First feed him and relieve his hunger, then abundantly deck out his table also. Do not make him a cup of gold, and not give him a cup of cold water. . . . Tell me, if you see him lacking necessary food and neglect to alleviate his hunger while you first set his table with silver, is he going to thank you rather than be indignant? Again, if you see him rapped in rags and stiff with cold and neglect to give him a coat while you build golden columns saying you are doing it to honor him, is he not going to think you are mocking him and consider it a supreme insult . . . ? Therefore, do not ignore your sisters and brothers in distress while you adorn Christ's house, for they are more a temple than the other.³⁵

³⁴Ibid., 20.

³⁵John Chrysostom, Homilies on the Gospel of Mathew 50.4-5, in *The Early Church Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff, 10:313. Taken from *Flesh of the Church, Flesh of Christ*, 71.

If the other appears as the temple of the divine, as part of the flesh of Christ, how should we relate to her and what can Merleau-Ponty's thought add to explicate this reality? I think that the clue comes again from gesture as that which presents the flesh of the other. As Renaud Barbaras shows, the other is for Merleau-Ponty the originary presentation of the un-presentable because "it is in and as its body that the other appears." Nevertheless, our perception of the other does not stop at the body as a physical object in some objective space. Instead, it is given to us in movement and in the uniquely singular style of the gesture of the other since the body of the other as flesh does not lie in opposition to its movement and gestures, but rather follows from and unfolds itself through them. The relation of visible to invisible takes on a new form for Barbaras:

From then on, to the degree that the other is another flesh, the other does not distinguish itself from movements through which it is manifested; its invisibility does not carry it beyond its visibility and is thus preserved as invisibility. If the other is "more than the sum of its signs" which are visible, it is nothing other than them, nothing other than this flesh, and it is to this degree that the flesh can surpass itself as a simple object and bear witness to a presence.³⁶

So, for example, Merleau-Ponty speaks of the manifestation of the color red as more than a thin *quale*, but that which shows itself with a characteristic thickness that relates to the rest of the visible. What is truly revelatory and what should be the object of faith's vision are the unique unrepeatable gestures, not only of the person of Christ but of each of us, since they are purveyors to what is invisible and marvelous in each of us. Only a phenomenology which is at once an ontology of the flesh can serve as the ground for a theology of gesture. Since gesture is but the articulation of the flesh, which spontaneously emerges from the sheer possibility of visibility that is the flesh, it is an invisible visible. This is to argue that the sacramental gestures that constitute the liturgical life of the Church are not derived from any sort of *a priori* archetypal forms, but are the unique expression and style of a person. The sacramental gestures in particular, and all ritual gestures in general, exploit the potential lines of force that inhabit the world of the flesh in much the same way that Merleau-Ponty suggests that the drawing of a triangle exploits possibilities of geometrical expression. In this regard, John Henry Newman's *Grammar of Assent*, can be understood as another way of directing the eye to this domain. Merleau-Ponty's approach to vision, which seems almost to have the character of a perceptual faith, directs us to the concrete character of religious experience in a way that, I believe, other thinkers miss.

In *God Without Being*, Marion, in contrast, speaks of the visible as the mirror of the invisible in light of the relation of the icon to the idol. The invisibility of the icon consists in what he calls the intention of the face.

³⁶Renaud Barbaras, *The Being of the Phenomenon*, trans. Ted Toadvine and Leonard Lawlor (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004), 259.

The more the face becomes visible, the more the invisible intention of the face whose gaze envisages us becomes visible. The invisible receives its sense from relation with the infinite since Marion asserts that “the intention issues from infinity.” “The icon,” according to Marion, “can only be measured on the basis of the infinite depth of the face, the intention that envisages depends only on itself.”³⁷ The careful reader can anticipate that we are dealing with the domain of the ideal and very quickly Marion discloses that the infinite which determines the character of this intention is taken from the Cartesian notion of the *conceptio Dei* as a *conceptio infiniti*. As he explains, the infinite for Descartes is in no way a graspable concept but is purely regulatory in its function. Although Marion clearly stops short of repeating Husserl’s attempt at trying to constitute ideal essences through recourse to Kantian ideas, it seems clear that intention and vision are modified by their reference to the infinite as a regulative concept. Marion argues as follows:

The icon obliges the concept to welcome the distance of the infinite, hence indeterminable by concept; however, it is not a question of using a concept to determine an essence but using it to determine an intention—that of the invisible advancing into the visible and inscribing itself therein by the very reference it imposes from the visible to the invisible. The hermeneutic of the icon means: the visible becomes the visibility of the invisible only if it receives its intention. . . . The visible and invisible grow together and as such their absolute distinction implies a radical conference of transferences.³⁸

There is still a palpable sense of the dialectic to be worked out between the lines of Marion’s opposition and transference back and forth between the visible and the invisible in what can be called his attempt to overcome the “muddy tyranny of the visible.”³⁹ To what degree can or does Marion want to escape the immanence of intentional consciousness to grasp visibility as flesh? Marion could probably respond, as he does in *Being Given*, that there is a difference for him between the notions of intuition and givenness, so that there could be, in principle, a range of phenomena of givenness to which no intuition belongs. In the end, it is not clear to me that Marion can restore the concreteness of the incarnation to vision and sacramental presence. In this light, the originality of Merleau-Ponty’s approach should be recognized as contributing a valuable insight into the materiality of Christian belief, especially as it affects our understanding of ritual and gesture as the foundation for further ecclesiological studies.

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³⁷Marion, *God Without Being*, 20.

³⁸*Ibid.*, 23.

³⁹Jean-Luc Marion, *Crossing the Visible*, trans. James K. A. Smith (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 65.