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Review of practical sacramental theology: at the intersection of liturgy and ethics, by Bruce T. Morrill

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Practical Sacramental Theology: At the Intersection of Liturgy and Ethics. By Bruce T. Morrill. Eugene, Oregon: Cascade, 2021. Pp. xi + 176. \$39; \$24.

This book compiles, with some editing, eight previously published peer-reviewed articles and book chapters by the prominent Jesuit liturgical theologian, Bruce T. Morrill. The essays in various ways advance a practical sacramental theology/spirituality; M. is concerned with how liturgy shapes concrete, embodied lives and forms people for ethical action in the world. [He](#) writes: “Sanctification, a most practical matter, is the key to Christian liturgy and ethics, a concrete way of living out the divine love with which God’s Spirit graces creation” (ix). As he notes, this statement is a core “axiom” of his “entire theological project” (ix). Liturgical worship reveals God’s presence in “embodied lives” (x) and reorients participants’ thoughts and actions to the “divine imagination for the world” (x).

The essays in this volume are bookended by two primarily methodological chapters on contemporary liturgical-sacramental theology (Chapter 1) and liturgy and power ([chap. 8](#)). Part II, “Sacramental Rites in Performative Perspective,” weaves together historical, [social](#)-scientific, and theological [analysis](#) of contemporary Catholic liturgical practice, with a chapter each on marriage, Eucharist, and penance. Part III, “Liturgy, Ethics, Scripture and Tradition,” leans more to the theoretical as it explores the relationship between liturgy and ethics with chapters on baptism, participation in mystery, and poverty of spirit. These essays include substantial reviews of relevant theological scholarship (e.g., Saliers, Metz, Gutiérrez, Schmemmann, John Paul II).

As is typical of a compilation of articles and addresses made for various audiences, the book lacks some connective threads and clearly is [primarily](#) addressing other scholars. The first chapter originally was M.’s 2012 plenary address to the Catholic Theological Society of America

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[conference](#) and does read much like a conference presentation. It may be difficult for readers to enter but is well worth the effort. In this “half-century review,” M. describes the state of sacramental theology, primarily in the American context, fifty years after the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). He laments a pervasive neglect or even dismissal of liturgical theology within academic theology, though [acknowledging](#) that this has eased since the 1980s. In his attention to practice, M. explicitly resists what he describes as a [still](#)-pervasive focus among systematic theologians upon “pure thought, doctrine founded upon argument (rather than mystery)” (4), and “the pernicious problem of textual positivism” (9). M. challenges theologians to study liturgy as practice that not only expresses meaning but forms participants, to account for “what is happening in the complex bodily, multivalent physical, social, and traditional dimensions of the sacraments in context” (15).

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Part II gets more concretely to examples of practice. M. offers concrete observations of liturgical dilemmas, [which](#) is especially interesting as it demonstrates lay Catholics’ “negotiation” (Baggett) around liturgy and their pressing questions about liturgical inclusion and innovation—for example, in receiving Eucharist, constructing marriage liturgy, etc.. Here M. provides specific illustrations from his own ministerial experience that enliven the discussion. He also addresses current ecclesial and political debates, even more timely now, noting that debates about whether Catholic politicians who advocate for abortion access should be excluded from Communion is a prominent example of what is really a larger point: “the liturgy of the Church itself is a type of political act” (41).

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A leader in the field, M. clearly has a deep knowledge of recent Protestant, Catholic, and Orthodox liturgical scholarship as well as church teaching. He is able to juxtapose these to illuminate significant gaps (e.g., in lay vs. hierarchical views on the practice of penance) and to

forge constructive proposals that attempt to mediate the contemporary situation and ecclesial aims. For example, Chapter 4 provides an insightful comparison of the divergent approaches to the sacrament of penance taken by theologian Monica Hellwig (in her 1982 book *Sign of Reconciliation and Conversion*) and by John Paul II (in his 1984 apostolic exhortation *Reconciliation and Penance*). M. then proposes communal rites on Ash Wednesday and practices throughout Lent as means of reinvigorating the sacrament of penance beyond a more rote and clerically oriented confessional practice that the laity avoid in droves.

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M. describes his work as practical theology, as “second-order theology arising from and returning to first-order theology”, and claims that such “hermeneutical circling, such integration of theory and practice, is essential to good sacramental-liturgical theology” (56). Like many contemporary practical theologians, he also insists on the power of narrative in theological methodology (152). Indeed, M.’s scholarship makes an important contribution to Catholic work in practical theology across the disciplines, demonstrating the rich interplay that can occur when deep historical study is brought into dialogue with nuanced attention to contemporary practice for the sake of more faithful living. M.’s work could be enriched by more explicit engagement with practical theological scholarship—Catholic and Protestant—which offers much grounding for his arguments and would provide many examples of highly contextual, multivalent studies of practice. This being said, in *Practical Sacramental Theology*, M. adeptly weaves together thorough scriptural and historical analysis, contemporary description and narrative, and insightful theological construction. This volume fortunately makes some of his key articles and addresses available to a wider readership.

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