Multiple Meanings in the Title Express Chauvet’s Purpose in
*The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*
Sarah Gagliano

The Sacraments can be understood in numerous ways. For instance, they are often seen as “primarily a means of salvation” or as instruments linking humankind and the Divine.¹ However, in *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*, author Louis-Marie Chauvet presents an alternative way to think of the Sacraments. He argues that Sacraments are best understood as symbols, stating “Now, it appears that by way of language and symbolism it is possible […] to present a general sacramental theology.”² Chauvet argues that all human interactions in the world are mediated. For instance, communication with others is mediated through language. Likewise, communication with God is mediated through the language of the Church, the Sacraments. These mediations are not “obstacles to truth,” but are rather “the very milieu within which human beings attain their truth and thus correspond to the Truth which calls them.”³ Furthermore, mediations such as the Sacraments serve as the lens that shapes how each subject perceives reality.⁴ A symbol cannot be viewed alone, for symbols are relevant only in relation to others.⁵ Chauvet argues that as symbols, the Sacraments link the past tradition in Scripture with the daily ethics that Catholics live out in the present.

In addition, the Sacraments must be considered in relation to the members of the body of

---
All subsequent references are from this publication.
² Chauvet, xcv
³ Ibid., 6.
⁴ Ibid., 10.
⁵ Ibid., 86.
Multiple Meanings in the Title Express Chauvet’s Purpose in *The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body*  
Sarah Gagliano

Christ. The wording of the title of Chauvet’s book highlights the relationship that the Sacraments form as symbols.

There are multiple definitions for the words used in the title of Chauvet’s work that help give significance to the meanings associated with them. For instance, the “Word of God” may reference the second person in the Trinity, Jesus Christ, or the Scriptures. In addition, the “body” can refer to the historical body of Christ, the Eucharistic elements, or the ecclesial body, which contains the members of the body of Christ. By organizing these various definitions together one can come up with several constructions. In this discussion I will focus on two such constructed phrases that clearly exemplify how the title successfully represents what Chauvet set out to do in the book.

By making use of the different meanings of the words in the title noted above, a way of wording the title is: “The Sacraments: Scripture at the Mercy of the Ecclesial Body.” Another construction is: “The Sacraments: Jesus Christ at the Mercy of the Historical and Eucharistic Bodies.” The first construction illustrates Chauvet’s point that there is room for the Sacraments in daily life. The second construction exemplifies symbolic exchange which occurs in the Sacraments and can be understood through the Trinity.

The first construction, “The Sacraments: Scripture at the Mercy of the Ecclesial Body,” highlights important arguments in Chauvet’s book. In this construction, there is reference to the Sacraments, Scripture and the ecclesial body. This corresponds to Chauvet’s structure of Christian identity, which is used to illustrate how the Sacraments are important in daily life. The first two components of Christian identity are verbatim in this title, and the final one, ethics, is implicitly implied in the ecclesial body. After all, it
is the people, the ecclesial body, who can perform ethical acts. In this way, the three elements of Christian identity are in this constructed title. For the Christian subject, the Sacraments are one element of Christian existence, as are the other two elements of Christian identity, Scripture and ethics. Chauvet suggests that all three of these elements are necessary for one to live a good Christian existence. As a result, these elements are related. For instance, with regard to the relationship between Scripture and the Sacraments, Scripture can be thought of as the words within the Bible; however, Chauvet argues that the Bible was “made to be proclaimed by the assembly.” Therefore, Scripture is at the mercy of the ecclesial body since it is up to the members to share the Scriptures. In addition, Chauvet argues that the Word is written on the body. Thus, the Word is not only proclaimed, it also becomes an action. Having celebrated the Sacraments, the ecclesial body can turn the Word that is inside them into visible actions. These actions are ethical actions that take place in the context of daily life. Thus, by living ethically, the ecclesial body can live out the Scriptures.

However, it is important to note that when Chauvet uses the term “Sacrament,” he does not mean only the seven recognized Sacraments of the Catholic Church. Chauvet defines this term as “everything that pertains to the thankfulness which the church expresses to God.” The various meanings or constructions that are possible in the title of the book accurately reflect this broader understanding of the term Sacrament.

---

6 Ibid., 41.
7 Ibid., 47.
8 Ibid., 101.
9 Ibid., 30.
There is also a relationship between the Sacraments and ethics, according to Chauvet. He argues that the “primary locus of Christian worship is the ethics of dailiness […] in charge of offering it as a ‘spiritual worship’ is the whole people of God.”¹⁰ The “whole people of God” can be considered the members of the ecclesial body who can perform ethical actions in their daily lives to turn the Word into actions as previously mentioned, but also to live out the Sacraments in the broader sense. For instance, under Chauvet’s broader definition of Sacrament, prayer can be thought of as a Sacrament.¹¹

The construction, “The Sacraments: Scripture at the Mercy of the Ecclesial Body,” illustrates the relationship among the three elements of Christian identity. This relationship illustrates the relevance of Scripture and the Sacraments in daily life, and thus effectively highlights a key point in Chauvet’s book.

The second construction, “Sacraments: Jesus Christ at the Mercy of the Historical and Eucharistic Bodies” emphasizes other important arguments in Chauvet’s book. Chauvet seeks to explain the Sacraments as a type of “symbolic exchange.” This type of exchange does not involve the exchange of objects with equal value, such as money for a loaf of bread. Rather, this type of exchange, present in the Sacraments, also occurs in daily lives, such as in simple conversations. It is through the body that human beings encounter the world. Symbolic exchange acknowledges this statement as exemplified by the emphasis on the relationship or interaction between the two subjects involved, not the item that is exchanged.

Stating that Jesus is at the mercy of the Eucharistic body touches upon central components of symbolic exchange. First of all, without Jesus, there is no Eucharistic

¹⁰ Ibid., 63.
¹¹ Ibid., 30.
body. Chauvet argues that Jesus is the “prime ‘sacrament’” because He is God’s “gift” to humankind. When Jesus became fully human, He bridged the gap between humankind and God—ultimately becoming the sacrifice that redeemed humankind. Sacraments can appear to be merely human acts, and thus an inadequate method of communication with God. However, Jesus’ divinity and humanity contradicts this statement. When Christians receive the Eucharistic body of Christ they become the Ecclesial body of Christ. At this point, Christians can give thanks to God because the Church’s thanks is the thanks given by Christ. There is “the obligatory implication of a return-gift” that comes after the “reception” of a “gift.” The best way humankind can give thanks to the Father is through His Son. Thus, through the Eucharistic body, Catholics can offer God the “return gift.” The terms “gift,” “reception” and “return-gift” are central to the concept of symbolic exchange.

In addition, to say that Jesus is at the mercy of the historical body emphasizes that Jesus was fully human as well as divine, which makes sense with respect to the Trinity. As best exemplified in the Paschal Mystery, the death and resurrection of Jesus, God became fully human. He had a human body and experienced human events, such as death. He was conceived by the power of the Holy Spirit, the third person of the Trinity. The Holy Spirit is a key player in the Sacraments. For instance, the Holy Spirit plays an important role in the celebration of the Eucharist, as exemplified in the Eucharistic Prayer II. In the first epiclesis, the Spirit creates the Eucharistic body of Christ, and in the

12 Ibid., 166.
13 Ibid., 146.
14 Ibid., 136.
second epiclesis the ecclesial body is evoked.\textsuperscript{15} Moreover, due to the presence of the Holy Spirit, God is present in Scripture, in the ecclesial body, and also in the “particular ritual word acts that this church effects in memory of [H]im,” the Sacraments.\textsuperscript{16} Thus, the Sacraments are the “symbolic expression of the eschatological embodiment of God through the Spirit” in Christ, and then in the church.\textsuperscript{17} Keeping in mind Chauvet’s way of explaining the Sacraments through symbolic exchange, one can envision an interaction between God and believers. Since the relationship among the three persons of the Trinity perfectly exemplifies symbolic exchange, Christology and Pneumatology are central to understanding the Sacraments as explained by Chauvet. Therefore, the title constructed so that it means “Sacraments: Jesus Christ at the Mercy of the Historical and Eucharistic Bodies” exemplifies symbolic exchange understood through the Trinity. Since this theme is a key message in Chauvet’s book, the title is effective at highlighting important aspects contained within its cover.

In conclusion, by analyzing two constructions of the title, it can be deduced that the title successfully represents what Chauvet set out to do in the book. The relevance of the Sacraments in daily life and the Trinity are central components in Chauvet’s description of the Sacraments. The Sacraments and the idea of religion in general are often seen as something that happens once a week on Sundays, and the concept of the Trinity- three persons in one- is misunderstood by the majority of Catholics. For this reason, Chauvet’s description of the Sacraments can seem confusing or possibly invaluable if one does not have a grasp of the terms or the dailiness of the Sacraments.

\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 137.
\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 169.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 167.
and the Trinity. One can only appreciate Chauvet’s model of viewing the Sacraments when one comes to terms with these concepts.
Multiple Meanings in the Title Express Chauvet’s Purpose in "The Sacraments: The Word of God at the Mercy of the Body"

Sarah Gagliano

Works Cited