

Foreword

THEOLOGIANS WRITING ON THE long, prodigal, and contentious tradition of reflection on the “sacrament” of the Eucharist are in for some surprises as they read this book! Artists of many kinds resist having their insights regarded as merely “illustrative” of what theologians supposedly already “know.” Some writers have been gripped by the “scandal” (1 Cor 1:23) of the Eucharist, of the relation of language to flesh, the profane to the sacred, the erotic and destabilising “grace” of its mystery. For Dr. Hancock to have included Graham Greene’s *Monsignor Quixote* was perhaps predictable, but not so the other half a dozen or so voices he argues that theologians cannot afford to ignore. Some of them require a strong stomach to read, but all of them subvert any sense we may have of certainty and possession in thinking or about or experiencing Eucharistic devotion in the supposed comfort of an ecclesial body. Dr. Hancock’s approach is challenging, disturbing, eminently readable, and should be taken to heart.

—Ann Loades CBE

Professor Emerita of Divinity, University of Durham; Honorary Professorial Fellow of St. Chad’s College, University of Durham; and Honorary Professor in the Divinity School at the University of St. Andrews.

Foreword

The sacramental life of the Christian Church has, from the very earliest times, been acquainted with scandal. There is reason to think that the celebration of the Eucharist, in some form, predates even the canonical Gospels, and by the end of the second century of the Christian era, Tertullian was grimly satirizing those outside the Church who clearly thought that the sacrament was shocking in the extreme and beyond what was tolerable. “We are accused,” he wrote, “of observing a sacred ritual in which we kill a little child and eat it.” He goes on to describe this action in graphic detail: “Come, plunge your knife into the infant. . . . Take the fresh young blood, saturate your bread with it, and eat freely.” For St. Paul, a hundred or so years earlier than Tertullian, in his first letter to the Corinthians, “Christ crucified” is a stumbling block, or more precisely a “scandal” to the Jews and foolishness to Greeks. Scandal, it seems, was never far from the early Church, and most especially in its liturgical practices and the sacrament of the Eucharist.

In this new book, Brannon Hancock explores this theme of the scandalous sacrament in the context of our current Western culture, which some would describe as “post-Christian,” and where, for the most part at the very least, the Christian churches that hold the sacramental life as central to their faith are in decline. Yet the scandal and the life of the sacrament continue in our society in literature and film, often in graphic and shocking forms that match the language of Tertullian, and, it is suggested, the life of the eucharistic community continues, perhaps impossibly, even beyond the boundaries of the Church itself.

But Aristotle observed that, in literature and art “a likely impossibility is always preferable to an unconvincing possibility.” In the texts of literature may be embraced, then, the scandal that has survived for so long in the rituals of Christendom and its aftermath in the Reformation West, finding its power, and perhaps even its “truth” in the postmodern scandals of

xii The Scandal of Sacramentality

brokenness and fragmentation. And if Christianity has for so long been, at best, cautious about the human body and its energies, at the heart of the sacrament there is no such tendency to prudishness, and in literature this is even less the case. In the texts addressed by Hancock here we return to the body in all its messy complexity, and therefore to the mystery that lies at the very heart of the incarnation, the Word made flesh. Here are bodies, broken, consumed, penetrated—as was (and is) the body of Christ at the Passion, on the cross and by the spear.

For some this may seem a profane book—but it is in its heart deeply sacramental and, perhaps, even devout. Yet it is timely and challenging, a reminder that religion, and the Christian sacramental tradition, remains a central part of our world and our experience of what it is to be human.

—David Jasper

Professor of Literature and Theology, University of Glasgow

SAMPLE