

Repurposing the Body: Sacramentality and the Poetics of Discipleship

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In this article I argue that the Christian body, or the body of the disciple, is a site of extraordinary sacramental power, as demonstrated in two different genres: early Christian martyrdom accounts and early Anglican poetry. Specifically, I attend to the martyrdom of Polycarp and George Herbert's "Love (3)" in order to manifest how martyrdom and poetry both preserve and transform witnesses. My argument is occasioned by what some call the loss of sacramental presence, especially in the poetry of our early Anglican bards. In contrast to this secularized and desacramentalized interpretation, I propose that sacramental presence pervades these works in much the same way that it pervades the early martyrdom accounts. The sacramental, in persecution and poetry, is formative and ineluctably bodily; neither Herbert nor Polycarp overlooked this.

... that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,
and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord,
to the glory of God the Father.
Philippians 2:10–11

All knees shall bow to thee; all wits shall rise,
And praise him who did make and mend our eyes.
*George Herbert, "Love (2)"*¹

Christian theology is rife with language about the body, language that has helped Christians to understand and order their lived experiences. For a prime example, one need only think of Paul's declaration

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¹ George Herbert, "Love (2)," in George Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, ed. John Tobin (London: Penguin Books, 1991), 48.

that his body will magnify Christ, whether in life or death. The proliferation of commentary on bodies, exemplified by eucharistic and Pauline theology, reveals a crucial aspect of Christian thought and practice: bodies are understood and expected to convey divine presence. Human bodies can and will be transformed into the likeness of Christ.

Early Christian martyrologies, which conveyed the life and death of a martyr to the church, make this expectation plain. It is especially clear in these martyrologies that early Christians expected the bodies of martyrs to be transformed for divine use, even long after the death of the martyrs. The generative power of the event of martyrdom, however, extended as well to the one who witnessed the martyrdom. I argue in this essay that witnesses (like the one at Polycarp's death) were preserved and transformed by and through *bearing witness* to the event of martyrdom. For instance, the witness of Polycarp's martyrdom says, "And when he had concluded the Amen and finished his prayer . . . we saw a miracle, we to whom it was given to see. *And we are preserved in order to relate to the rest what happened.*"² This essay asks whether this divine transformation of martyr and witness can apply to all Christian disciples through another medium, that of writing and reading poems.

I argue that it can, and will do so by connecting the model of bodily transformation demonstrated in Polycarp's martyrdom to two Anglican poetic accounts of the body. I hope to demonstrate that, baptized into Christ's life and death and nurtured by the eucharist, the disciple's body has been repurposed and enabled, in Paul's words, "to will and to work for his [the Father's] good pleasure" (Phil. 2:13). Such a repurposing may occur in the martyr and witness, as well as in the exchange between poem and reader. Such transformations are possible because a disciple in body and spirit is *already* being conformed to the image of Christ through participation in the sacraments. In order to begin accounting for the nature of these transformations, I will argue here that bodily practices and experiences need to begin with the sacramental character of discipleship as an embodied experience.

In order to frame this sacramental character of discipleship, I will open briefly with an exploration of the body that magnifies Christ

² Marcion, "The Martyrdom of Polycarp," §15, in *The Early Christian Fathers*, ed. and trans. Cyril C. Richardson (Philadelphia, Pa.: Westminster Press, 1953), 134, italics added.

in Philippians 1 and 2. It is my intention to show how the martyrdom of Polycarp, which is exemplary of early Christian martyrdoms, conforms to the Pauline doxological body. Polycarp's vivid testimony and death, as well as the experience of the witness who would later hand on the martyrology, ignites the imagination in ways that redouble and intensify Christian anthropology in late antiquity.

I will then employ this anthropology to interpret the experience of the body in the poems of John Donne and George Herbert. Read through the lens of the transformed body, both Donne and Herbert illuminate embodied experience—both the body in their poems, as well as the body transformed by reading their poems. That is, the transformation envisioned in these poems is not just any change; rather, I argue, bodies (like Polycarp's and his witness's) are repurposed for divine glory. Through martyrdom and proclamation, famine and feast, prose and poetry, discipleship brings a transfigured life, the life of the resurrection, to the world.

Pauline Bodies and the Martyrdom of the Sacramental Body

In the opening chapter of his letter to the Philippians, the imprisoned Paul confides his “eager expectation and hope” that Christ will be exalted in his body, “whether by life or by death” (1:20). Paul details this exaltation in the verses of the so-called Christ hymn (2:6–11). He employs language of embodiment to describe Christ's actions, as well as the worship that the world is obliged to give to Christ. Although “he was in the form of God” (2:6), Christ “emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, being born in human likeness” (2:7) and in his “human form” he “became obedient to the point of death” (2:8). Consequently, “at the name of Jesus every knee should bend . . . and every tongue should confess” (2:10–11).

Bending knees and confessing with tongues are part and parcel of a disciple's response to Christ's own embodied and obedient actions. Paul urges the Philippians, his readers, to imitate him in this embodiment charged for praise. They are to come to terms with their own salvation by embracing their own bodies as reflections of Christ's body, places in which God works, thereby “enabling [them] both to will and to work for his good pleasure” (2:13). Just as Paul has done in his own body, he wants the Philippians to reorient their bodies as conduits of divine worship and work, and imitators in life and in death of Christ's own body, which itself worked for the Father's “good pleasure.” As

Stephen Fowl puts it, “These living sacrifices will thus witness bodily to God’s will.”³ Salvation consists in this repurposing of the body.

Merely understanding something about the body is not enough. Therefore, Paul continues by teaching the Philippians how to live in their repurposed bodies. Again, imitation is key: Christ’s body and mind are to be formative for the Philippians’ practices. Paul offers a *paideia* of the body in order to prepare the Philippians to work together as a community, and to ready them to be “poured out as a libation over the sacrifice and the offering of your faith.” In either scenario, their bodies are to be marked by gladness and rejoicing (2:17–18).⁴

Paul’s vision of his body highlights not only obedience to Christ, but also the body as a sacramental locus. The human body, as it is now, has the capacity to reflect Christ and his broken and glorious body. Although the reflection might be dim, this reflection points to a future glorification of the human body which has already been actualized in Christ’s human body. In this reflection the Christ-like body magnifies Christ, both in life and death.⁵

Early Christian martyrdom accounts vividly depict this Pauline *paideia*; in the martyrdom of a disciple, Christ becomes magnified bodily in a visible and painful way. The sheer number of recorded martyrdoms demonstrates the fact that the deaths of disciples animate the early Christian community, instilling courage in those who remain, challenging them to stay faithful.

The deaths of martyrs are also significant because of the way in which they *reorder* the lives and bodies of the witnesses and readers. In the same way that Paul hopes the Philippians will imitate him, and in so doing imitate Christ, early Christians see themselves continuing the ministry of the martyrs. Participation in this martyr tradition reorders their lives completely, by instilling within the early Christian community a sense that their own bodies are testimonies of Christ’s

³ Stephen Fowl, “The Primacy of the Witness of the Body to Martyrdom in Paul,” in *Witness of the Body: The Past, Present, and Future of Christian Martyrdom*, ed. Michael L. Budde and Karen Scott (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2011), 47.

⁴ Fowl draws a similar conclusion. See Fowl, “Primacy of the Witness,” 47.

⁵ As Fowl notes, Paul’s letters “rarely, if ever, directly address the issue of martyrdom.” Fowl argues that despite this “truism,” martyrdom fits as a piece of a larger picture of Christian formation that Fowl calls “witness of the body.” See Fowl, “Primacy of the Witness,” 43–45.

persistent presence in the world, as well as by reordering their practices around that testimony.

As Rowan Williams observes, the martyred disciple's body becomes a locus of divine presence. For Williams, the body of the disciple bears divine power and presence precisely because of the sacramentality of bodily presence. That is, the testimony and actions of the disciple, formed through sacramental practice, harbor divine presence. To be a disciple is, in part, to have one's embodied experience transformed to show forth Christ's body.⁶ The martyrdom of the second-century bishop Polycarp gives us a sense of the complex overlay of practices through which the disciple becomes capable of bearing Christ's presence in the body, either as the subject of martyrdom or as a witness to martyrdom.

In order to understand how Polycarp's martyrdom shows forth a transfigured, resurrected life, it will be salutary to first revisit Polycarp's story. Initially, the account proceeds in predictable ways: Polycarp is accused and then offered the chance to recant, which he refuses. Rather, he willingly places himself on the pyre. Then he prays aloud.⁷

It is here that the narrative becomes exemplary, not only among martyrdom accounts, but also in the way it evokes the importance of the disciple's body. That is, Polycarp's story constructs a eucharistic resemblance; the resemblance shows both in the narrator's account of Polycarp's visage tied to the pyre, as well as in Polycarp's prayer over his own body.

And with his hands put behind him and tied, like a noble ram out of a great flock ready for sacrifice, a burnt offering ready and acceptable to God, he looked up to heaven and said:

“Lord God Almighty, Father of thy beloved and blessed Servant Jesus Christ, through whom we have received full knowledge of thee, ‘the God of angels and powers and all creation’ and of the whole race of the righteous who live in thy presence: I bless thee, because thou hast deemed me worthy of this day and hour, to take my part in the number of the martyrs, in the cup of thy Christ, for ‘resurrection to eternal life’ of soul and body in the immortality of

⁶ See Rowan Williams, “Resident Aliens: The Identity of the Early Church,” in *Why Study the Past? The Quest for the Historical Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans Publishing, 2005), 32–59.

⁷ Marcion, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” §14.

the Holy Spirit; among whom may I be received in thy presence this day as a rich and acceptable sacrifice, just as thou hast prepared and revealed beforehand and fulfilled, thou that art the true God without any falsehood.”⁸

One can almost see Polycarp, had his hands been free, crossing his body thrice, as if to consecrate the host:

“For this and for everything I praise thee, I bless thee, I glorify thee, through the eternal and heavenly High Priest, Jesus Christ, thy beloved Servant, through whom be glory to thee with him and Holy Spirit both now and unto the ages to come. Amen.”⁹

By introducing eucharistic language, Polycarp reclaims his body from the violent context of the imperial execution, sanctifying it instead as a vessel of praise for the Father through Christ the “High Priest.” Polycarp has repurposed his body as a eucharistic host.

Moreover, the capacity of Polycarp’s body to be a thing of praise to Christ is intimately tied up with the capacity of his body to be a conduit of Christ’s presence. It is crucial to note here that Polycarp’s chronicler is serious about this transformation; Polycarp’s body becomes like bread in the oven, baked for divine and not imperial consumption.

For the fire made the shape of a vaulted chamber, like a ship’s sail filled by the wind, and made a wall around the body of the martyr. And he was in the midst, not as burning flesh, but as bread baking or as gold and silver refined in a furnace. And we perceived such a sweet aroma as the breath of incense or some other precious spice.¹⁰

Likewise, the witness’s own body is “preserved” in order to both “perceive” the sensual aspect of the martyrdom and bear witness to this miracle.¹¹ Such preservation is understood to be the work of Providence. The witness remains alive, but is, most importantly, now

⁸ Marcion, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” §14.

⁹ Marcion, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” §14.

¹⁰ Marcion, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” §15.

¹¹ “And when he had concluded the Amen and finished his prayer . . . we saw a miracle, we to whom it was given to see. *And we are preserved in order to relate to the rest what happened*” (Marcion, “The Martyrdom of Polycarp,” §15).

charged with and transformed by a mission intimately tied to the corporeal spectacle he witnesses.

It is significant that witnessing the martyrdom does not require the narrator to explain the martyrdom, to make sense of it for others. Rather, the narrator need only faithfully hand on to others the testimony of Polycarp's life and death so that they too might participate with and through Polycarp in Christ's own life and death. Craig Hovey echoes this point when he says, "The church lived in constant participation of the death of Christ produced by the martyr-church. . . . It affirms that Jesus cannot be the *first* Christian martyr, since there are no Christian martyrs except those who die the death of Christ."¹² Consequently, the transformation that changes both Polycarp and his witness is also a transformation wrought by Christ in which the whole church participates and is changed.

Polycarp's martyrdom, therefore, pinpoints the way that the clash between the early church and the empire contributes to a significant revision of anthropology. All bodies, not just the emperor's, can share in the divine. Bodies can become what Patricia Cox Miller calls "a crucial nodal point linking the transcendent and earthly realms."¹³

Consider the synesthesia that Polycarp's witness experiences as he watches and smells Polycarp's body do things that bodies do not usually do, such as smell and appear like bread in the oven.¹⁴ The literally burning flesh illuminates the arena, not merely through a shift in perception or understanding—as if the martyrdom is reducible to a public relations spectacle for the early church—but also with a more palpably felt shift in sovereignty, as the resurrection's challenge to death's finality is made tangible in Polycarp's body. The transformation and repurposing of Polycarp's and the witness's bodies bring about "the first touch of the Resurrection . . . into the present."¹⁵

What is important here is this: among Christians of late antiquity, bodies themselves were understood *and* expected to convey divine

¹² Craig Hovey, *To Share in the Body: A Theology of Martyrdom for Today's Church* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Brazos Press, 2008), 79, italics added.

¹³ Patricia Cox Miller, *The Corporeal Imagination: Signifying the Holy in Late Ancient Christianity* (Philadelphia, Pa.: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2009), 62.

¹⁴ See Miller's discussion of the body's *thingness*, "that moment of clarity when everyday flesh catches fire," a moment when blood, bones, and spirit are so thoroughly fused that they convey a certain incandescent clarity" (*Corporeal Imagination*, 63).

¹⁵ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 78; cited in Miller, *Corporeal Imagination*, 64.

presence, and in a both public and sacramental way. As Polycarp's execution demonstrates to us so well, bodies are not only destined for resurrection, but *already* identify with and manifest the resurrection by making divine power present in their pre-resurrection state. Therefore, the public and communal event of a disciple's martyrdom is the demonstration *par excellence* of the new kind of embodiment that Christ's incarnation offers to all humanity, but that is felt most keenly in the witnessing church.

Donne, Herbert, and the Poetics of the Transformed Body

The first part of this essay has argued for a theological anthropology that sees the body as corporeally transformed by divine presence. If Polycarp's martyrdom is a faithful rendition of the Pauline magnification of Christ in the physical body, then so is his witness's bodily preservation for the sake of proclaiming Polycarp's story. In what remains, I will present two poetic imaginaries of the Pauline vision of the bodily magnification of Christ: John Donne and George Herbert. Both in their understanding of embodiment as well as in the performative aspects of their verse, these poets render the body as consummated by divine glory. While I do not presume to contribute to either the literary or biographical debates over Donne and Herbert's poetry,¹⁶ I offer a theological reading that suggests that Herbert and Donne champion and even perform the sacramental transformation of the body and its practices that is at work in Polycarp's martyrdom. They effect this transformation of the body, however, through poetry.¹⁷

While Donne and Herbert are well-known as poets and as preachers for interweaving imagery that is both sacred and deeply sensuous, it is not always clear how corporeality functions in the context of their own theological commitments. This lack of clarity is especially problematic for our study given that, like most of their contemporary

¹⁶ For introductions to literary and biographical criticism of Donne and Herbert, see Deborah Aldrich Larson, *John Donne and Twentieth-Century Criticism* (Rutherford, N.J.: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1989); James Boyd White, "This Book of Starres": *Learning to Read George Herbert* (Ann Arbor, Mich.: University of Michigan Press, 1994); and Julia Carolyn Guernsey, *The Pulse of Praise: Form as a Second Self in the Poetry of George Herbert* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

¹⁷ For a literary analysis of their work that excludes their theological considerations, see Elizabeth M. A. Hodgson, *Gender and the Sacred Self in John Donne* (Newark, N.J.: University of Delaware Press, 1999).

English clerics, both were outspokenly Reformed and unsurprisingly critical of the controversial doctrine of transubstantiation in their homilies and apologetic prose.¹⁸ In fact, the most recent theological treatment of their work emphasizes their Reformation commitments to such an extent that it conceives of transformation in their poetry as a strictly rationalist metanoia. This treatment precludes any significant role that sacraments might play in the transformation of embodied experience.¹⁹ Against this interpretation, I contend that both Donne and Herbert perform an embodied poetic that is as sacramental as Polycarp's martyrdom.

John Donne, whose poetry and prose regularly treat bodily experience as an entree to theological reflection, is fond of death. For Donne, the experience of and reflection on death bring us closer to a bodily experience of divine love than any other human experience. For, without death, there would be no resurrection. As Regina Schwartz notes, by calling the exemplary Lover (Christ) to resurrection from death, Donne not only affirms the goodness of the body but also includes the human body in the *telos* of cosmic love.²⁰

Indeed, his erotic poetry envisions the body in harmony with the sacred. For instance, "The Ecstasy," a poem that is unmistakably about sex, poses a rhetorical question about the body's significance. "Our bodies why do we forbear?"²¹ If the true object of love is the soul, then of what use is the body? Donne answers, "They are ours, though they are not we, we are / The intelligences, they the sphere." It is easy to abstract from the body the "we," the lovers, who are united in love. Yet, it is difficult to conceive of this union without the body, the sphere in which the intelligence operates.

Indeed, the body gives to the soul a greater reach through the senses and, especially, sensual contact. The body expands the sphere of the soul. "We owe them thanks, because they thus, / Did us, to us,

¹⁸ Donne's quality as a preacher is renowned. Frederick Quinn considers Donne to be one of the greatest English preachers, one of the "giants of Anglican preaching," alongside Latimer, Hooker, Andrewes, Wesley, Temple, and Newman. See Frederick Quinn, *To Be a Pilgrim: The Anglican Ethos in History* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2001), 72.

¹⁹ See Regina M. Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics at the Dawn of Secularism: When God Left the World* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2008), chapters 5 and 6.

²⁰ Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, 114–116.

²¹ John Donne, "The Ecstasy," in John Donne, *The Complete English Poems* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 53–56.

at first convey, / Yielded their forces, sense, to us.”²² Without the body, the soul’s knowledge and felicities would be woefully diminished. In this way, the body nourishes the soul; it provides the soul with a suitable partner in forming the human whole—affections, faculties, and all.²³

Donne cherishes the body as a kind of corporeal playground on which the soul anticipates and prepares for the union with another soul in love. And moreover, the body is the conduit for the soul’s communication. The body is the book upon which the soul writes love’s mysteries large.²⁴

On man heaven’s influence works not so,
But that it first imprints the air;
So soul into the soul may flow,
Though it to body first repair.
As our blood labours to beget
Spirits, as like souls as it can,
Because such fingers need to knit
That subtle knot, which makes us man:
So must pure lovers’ souls descend
T’ affections, and to faculties,
Which sense may reach and apprehend,
Else a great prince in prison lies.²⁵

The experience of love transforms the body into a witness, a book to be read by those “weak men,” who themselves have yet to experience the mystery of love, who require a greater preparation. Yes, the body does die. However, Donne’s “preoccupation with death and with love are of a piece.”²⁶ They coalesce in the person of Christ, who, for

²² Donne, “The Ecstasy,” 55.

²³ Donne’s concept of body as other to the soul also challenges any understanding of body as passive conduit through which the soul exercises its forces upon the world. It seems, rather, that for Donne, the soul and body must actively and harmoniously cooperate in order to facilitate the whole human experience.

²⁴ By contrast, Judah Stampfer believes that the consciousness is the medium of Donne’s metaphysical poetry, given the dissolution of the “old cosmologies.” See Judah Stampfer, *John Donne and the Metaphysical Gesture* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 27: “To Donne, words were still magically charged, with an enormous freight of categories, correspondences and allusions, though no longer grounded in a stable structure of order.”

²⁵ Donne, “The Ecstasy,” 55.

²⁶ Schwartz, *Sacramental Poetics*, 115.

Donne, is the ultimate lover, whose body is also transformed by the power of Love.

Love calls the Lover to death in order to illuminate Love's limitlessness. But Love also calls the Lover to resurrection. For Donne, the believer participates in the life, death, and resurrection of his own love, as well as in the partaking of the eucharistic meal. Thus, love, death, and sacramental practices revolve around each other in the bodily and spiritual experiences of lovers. Lovers are transformed by these experiences, and their bodies are like textual witnesses of these transformations.

It would be inaccurate to say that the transformation envisioned in "The Ecstasy" is an intellectual or merely affective shift.²⁷ Rather, we see in Donne's poems like "The Ecstasy" a theological understanding of bodies that are constantly showing forth the activities of their souls. Donne's understanding of the transparency of the body to the soul contributes to a model of transformation by which the body is already predisposed to experience and reflect grace. Bodies are not only signs of an inward transformation: they are in fact changed by that inward grace, and are thereby able to testify to it.²⁸

Hence, we could say that the change for which Donne is looking in this poem is the experience of the truth about death after Christ: to know the Christological mystery in the deepest and most corporeal way. The world to be revealed through the body and to his readers is the one in which souls as well as bodies are transformed into the likeness to Christ. In his poetry, Donne imagines and enacts this material connection between the life lived now and the life of the world to come.

George Herbert's poetry, like Donne's, deals with embodied realities. Although Herbert's setting of these material realities is far less exotic than in Donne's poems, the theological outcomes are no less striking. Once again, the temptation is to filter Herbert's poetry

²⁷ Again, consider Schwartz's assertion that "it was the *mystery* of the sacrament more than its materiality that was so attractive to Reformation poets like [Donne and] Herbert. . . the mysteries of the Eucharist gave Reformation *poets* little difficulty. Rejecting the ontological questions . . . they asked instead how the signifier, the word, which is the word of God, could point to the mystery of man joining God" (*Sacramental Poetics*, 119).

²⁸ This in contrast to Schwartz's presumption that a "sacramental poetics" is one in which "signs are empowered to be effective—if not to confer grace, then to change their hearer; if not to grant him eternity, then to manifest a world" (*Sacramental Poetics*, 7).

through an intellectualistic model of transformation, thereby rendering embodied sacramental experience or transformation unintelligible. I propose, however, that this approach to Herbert's work misses essential aspects of his poetry: the important theology of creation at work within, the reality of the body and its practices redeemed and repurposed for glory, and the true sacramental performance that his poetry works upon the reader.

Some critics have interpreted Herbert's turn from secular pursuits to pastoral vocation as an abstract battle between the material and spiritual realms. At only sixteen years old, he is reputed to have declared in a letter to his mother that he had dedicated his poetic career "to Gods [*sic*] glory."²⁹ Herbert, called by King James "the jewel of that university," eventually acted upon his vocational dedication by voluntarily relinquishing his University lectureship as well as his seat in Parliament, choosing instead the poverty of a country parish.³⁰ It is an easy temptation to see Herbert's turn from the aristocratic to the ascetic as a battle of flesh and spirit. However, against this reading, Austin Warren, in his classic *Rage for Order*, interprets the tension as part of a "conflict . . . of spirit against pride."³¹ Warren suggests that Herbert's struggle is not between flesh and spirit, but rather between the gentlemanly yet unoriginal life of a nobleman and the spiritual vocation of the priest. Indeed, Herbert's renunciation pertains to his social entitlement, not to embodied experience as such.

Herbert's humble turn in vocation is expressed aptly in his poem "The Pulley," in which creation *per se* is not rejected. Rather, the Creator gives it as a gift to be valued precisely as a precious jewel given to a loved one; not to be prized for itself, but to be received as a token of love. Humanity's restlessness with the goods of the world drives the search for the gift-giver.³²

Herbert's "Love (3)" is an excellent example of the way he treats the complex relationship of body and soul.

²⁹ *The Complete Works in Verse and Prose of George Herbert* (London: 1874), 363; cited in Stanley Stewart, *George Herbert* (Boston, Mass.: Twayne Publishers, 1986), 2.

³⁰ Austin Warren, *Rage for Order: Essays in Criticism* (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1948), 22.

³¹ Warren, *Rage for Order*, 23.

³² George Herbert, "The Pulley," in Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, 150; White, "This Book of Starres," 231–236.

Love bade me welcome: yet my soul drew back,
 Guilty of dust and sin.
 But quick-eyed Love, observing me grow slack
 From my first entrance in,
 Drew nearer to me, sweetly questioning,
 If I lacked anything.

A guest, I answered, worthy to be here:
 Love said, You shall be he.
 I the unkind, ungrateful? Ah my dear,
 I cannot look on thee.
 Love took my hand, and smiling did reply,
 Who made the eyes but I?

Truth Lord, but I have marred them: let my shame
 Go where it doth deserve.
 And know you not, says Love, who bore the blame?
 My dear, then I will serve.
 You must sit down, says Love, and taste my meat:
 So I did sit and eat.³³

The poem gives the reader a first-person perspective of a door-step meeting between host and guest. In a series of contrasting pairs of actions, Herbert outlines how the guest does nearly everything he can to refuse Love's encroaching advances. But though the guest protests Love's welcome, and even refuses to look at the host until, in a moment that is characterized almost equally by relief as it is by exhaustion, the guest finally relents and joins Love's feast.

The guest first responds to Love's invitation through avoidance and aversion, which are sustained until the end of the poem. The guest pulls away, announces a lack of worth, pretends that the host must not be looked at, and even tries to serve the meal to Love, rather than allow Love to serve.

Herbert describes the guest's feeling of guilt in bodily terms, conveying a sense of a dirtiness that has accrued and hardened over time. "Guilty of dust and sin," the guest recoils and settles into a previous, "slack" state. But "quick-eyed Love" is ready; drawing nearer, offering the guest whatever he needs to feel welcome.

³³ Herbert, "Love (3)," in Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, 178.

On the surface, Love's actions and question seem to create an inviting atmosphere for the recalcitrant guest. However, Love comes uncomfortably close, too close for the guest. The guest has accepted his guilt, preferring to remain alone with it. Perhaps realizing this, Love's "sweetly questioning" makes the guest more aware of his guilt. Love's intimacy and extravagant welcome only accentuate the dirtiness of the guest, as well as his efforts to avoid any disruption to that dirtiness.

Attempting to stave off more offers from Love, the guest claims that he's not "worthy to be here." Again, Love is ready and plainly declares, "You shall be he [the guest]." The guest tries to adapt to this tactic, complaining to the host that "I cannot look on thee." But at this point, it is clear that the guest is already losing steam, calling Love "my dear," and by the end of the second stanza allowing Love to take his hand. Love again has the last word of the stanza: "Who made the eyes but I?" Love's claim to authorship of the eyes suggests that the guest's complaint (that he lacks the capacity to look on Love) is a fiction.

In the final stanza, the guest again demurs Love's welcome, claiming that he deserves to be sent away. Love acknowledges the guest's "shame." Instead of going "where it doth deserve," however, the shame has already been taken up by Love, who "bore the blame." In a scene reminiscent of Peter's attempt to wash Christ's feet in the upper room, Herbert's guest tries to take up the role and activity of the servant, declaring that he will act the part of a waiter.

Indeed, Love agrees that the response to the guest's shame should be an embodied one; but rather than punishment or slavish service, Love offers a material remedy for the guilt, the shame, and the bodily ramifications of a life of sin: "You must sit down . . . and taste my meat." At long last, and wanting for more excuses, the guest "did sit and eat." In the place of a spectacular finale, the poem ends on a mundane note as the guest scoots a chair up to the table and joins in the feast. In terms almost grossly gastronomical, Herbert subtly conveys an anagogical resolution in the reunion of Love and the guest in the love feast.

Thus, Herbert elegantly portrays guilt, shame, and spiritual exhaustion as states that are expressed and experienced bodily and that may even have bodily consequences. As the poem demonstrates, these states are not only experienced intellectually and abstractly; rather, they impose themselves on the whole range of human experience.

And in those human experiences, those states may even manifest primarily as bodily states.

And yet, such experiences have deep spiritual import. Notice that Love takes for granted that the eyes find their origin and completion in Love. The duality of origin and end become the ground for a new kind of experience, foreign to the one to which the guest had become so accustomed. That is, the guest is ultimately satisfied by participating in Love's "meat." The pairs in the text—the ungrateful I/eye and the smiling Love who creates the eye/I—confirm this duality by creating a parallelism that begins with creation and culminates in transformation offered by Love.

Moreover, this transformation proceeds almost despite the guest's reticence and balking. Notice that much of Love's dialogue comes as a reminder that the guest was created and redeemed by the same Love. Although Love describes these as completed actions, Love invites the guest to enjoy and deepen his transformation by participating: to sit, to eat, to feast. Like Polycarp's martyrdom, the transformation of the guest happens within the context of his participation in the feast of Love's meat.

Unlike Polycarp's martyrdom, the guest's transformation offers little in the way of spectacle. Rather, the situation is awkward and uncomfortable as Love transgresses repeatedly on the guest's desire to go it alone. Eventually, the reader shares in what might be a single-course meal; this meal replaces the fantastic and public display of Polycarp's offering himself as a divine meal. Nevertheless, a christological transformation is wrought in both cases as Christ offers himself first, through which Polycarp and the guest are both changed in life-altering ways.

Moreover, the poem not only traces the transformation of the speaker by Love's feast; it also initiates a change in the reader as she considers her own feelings of unworthiness in light of her own past, as well as her participation in the eucharist. "Love (3)" creates a space in which the reader can actualize and reshape practices as she sees the origin and transformation of her own body in light of three doctrinal loci: creation, redemption, and eschaton. The poem does this with incredible ease by uniting the primordial past, the present, and the hereafter in the theme of the love feast. The past, present, and future meet in the eucharist, just as they meet in eyes/I made after and redeemed in the image of Love. These eyes are not just those of the speaker; they are also those of the reader, who is asked to consider and

act on the very real possibility that her eyes, while marred, have been redeemed and are now invited to “look on thee.”

Hence, sacramental power for Herbert reaches beyond the eucharist to encompass all of the listener’s life. Indeed, as Rowan Williams has noted, Herbert is not directly opposed to an understanding of real presence in the eucharist, but is rather opposed to limiting real (sacramental) presence strictly to the eucharist. Herbert is “witnessing to this priority of divine freedom and divine initiative, God’s capacity to be anywhere and everywhere. And if that is so, it is also God’s freedom to show who and what God is, not in religious places but in the stuff of human relation and in the stuff of the material world.”³⁴ For Herbert, the speaker’s body is united with Love in both its created state as well as its redeemed and eschatological (feasting) state. Moreover, the unification with love in redemption is a transformation of the body that occurs in multiple stages. So too, from the very invitation to sit and eat, to the invitation Herbert extends to the reader to renew her own seeing and eating, Herbert’s poetry reaches beyond the text to transform the reader, or hearer.

Thus, the poem makes a claim on the reader that can only be answered ecclesiologically and doxologically. Just as the life of Polycarp’s chronicler is reordered to witness, so the reader of Herbert’s poem is reordered to participation in the love feast. The transformation wrought by Love is a thoroughly embodied one in that it changes the embodied experiences of the reader and directs them to a new end.³⁵ Of course, this transformation begins as a process of re-understanding one’s experiences, and accepting the call to repent. Nevertheless, this new understanding is only the first step of many toward the bodily experiences of sitting and eating in communion, bodily experiences that are important because they participate in a life ordered to praise.

As I have sought to demonstrate, Donne’s and Herbert’s poems participate in their own mode of glorifying Christ, or Love. In order to see this, however, it is essential to read these poems within a broad sacramental context that resists premature intellectual closure. Only

³⁴ Rowan Williams, “From William Temple to George Herbert, Part 2,” delivered Saturday, May 25, 2002, at St. Peter’s, Eastern Hill, <http://web.stpeters.org.au/iss/reports/RWjun02pt2.shtml/>.

³⁵ Herbert is drawing on a traditional notion of sacrament as bearing redemptive medicine, an image medieval authors like Bonaventure favored. See Bonaventure, *Breviloquium*, Doctoris Seraphici S. Bonaventurae Opera Omnia, vol. 5 (Quaracchi: Collegium S. Bonaventurae, 1882–1902), VI.1.2.

a concept of sacramental sign that is thoroughly corporeal will make sense of the performative aspect of their work. That is, their poetry does not merely conceptualize the divine, but rather poetically witnesses to divine power to transform and even reunite. Herbert's various poems on the eucharist, for example, demonstrate his explicitly christological understanding of what is conveyed to the believer in the eucharist. The final lines of "The Holy Communion" illustrate this nicely:

This gift of all gifts is the best,
Thy flesh the least that I request.
Thou took'st that pledge from me:
Give me not that I had before,
Or give me that, so I have more;
My God, give me all Thee.³⁶

In this presentation of the eucharist, the object is the believer, eating the body/bread and drinking the blood/wine. The *telos* of the eucharist, in the words of Dionysius the Areopagite, is to "collect our divided lives into uniform deification, and give communion and union with the One, by the Godlike folding together of our diversities."³⁷ Thus in a manner analogous to this transformation effected in participation in the eucharist, Donne's and Herbert's poetry performs sacramentally to demonstrate divine power as well as to transform the reader.

This poetic model of bodily transformation springs from an ancient experience of sacramental gift and transformation. Disciples sing "Divine Hymns, by which we are supermundanely enlightened and moulded to the sacred Songs of Praise."³⁸ The sacramental gift is Christ's body given to transform the world. In response to the divine gift, Christians give their bodies to God, turning their "double pains to double praise."³⁹ Given thus, Christians' bodies and souls alike are repurposed for participation in grace. Sacramental fulfillment

³⁶ George Herbert, "The Holy Communion," in Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, 189.

³⁷ Dionysius the Areopagite, *Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, trans. John Parker (London: John Parker and Co., 1899), III.1.

³⁸ Dionysius the Areopagite, *The Divine Names*, in *The Works of Dionysius the Areopagite*, trans. John Parker (London: James Parker and Co., 1897), I.3.

³⁹ George Herbert, "Man's Medley," in Herbert, *The Complete English Poems*, 123.

conceived in this way is part and parcel of a radical vision in which divine action, exemplified in Christ's life, death, and resurrection, points to a new, corporeal presence of the divine among the human. This is the sacramental understanding to which the Anglican poets cling; these are disciples for whom writing and reading poetry, a medium no less lived or bodily than the martyr's pyre, can also participate in transformative witness.

Finally, just as Polycarp's martyrdom was not transformative for himself alone but also for the chronicler who witnessed the martyrdom, so for the poets John Donne and George Herbert embodied, sacramental life is not restricted to the poems themselves, but is offered to their readers. By reframing bodily experiences and practices in a new sacramental light, the act of reading Donne's and Herbert's poems participates in a repurposing of the reader's own bodily situation. Repurposed thus, the reader's body and its activities witness to the presence and transformative power of Donne and Herbert's Love.

The Poetics of Discipleship, Or, How to Be a Local Eucharistic Host

I have argued for a reimagining of bodies—specifically those of saints and disciples—that moves beyond a dualistic impasse separating bodies from their witness. A sacramental understanding of body language takes seriously the christological metamorphosis envisioned by Paul, Polycarp, Donne, and Herbert. Each in his own way, these authors reflect an important strand of sacramental theology that understands the eucharist as a source of disciplinary formation in the progressive transformation to the image of Christ. Witnessing martyrdom and reading poems in the manner described above relies on a theological anthropology that is not shy about the body's capacity to be transformed as a witness to Christ's love.

This metamorphosis is reducible to neither an equivocal revocation of the natural body nor a dialectically intellectual exchange. Rather, the sacraments participate in the disciple's transformation through divine grace toward the *telos* of deification. While this *telos* is ultimately realized in the eschatological reunion with the Creator, it is progressively witnessed to, now in the body, whether martyred or alive, repurposed for praise.