

# Sacramental Ontology and the Church of Diaspora

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## Abstract:

Sacramental theology is experiencing an ongoing renewal among theologians within churches that have been critical of sacramental traditions. Hans Boersma is one important representative of such a sacramental worldview. This article argues that before wholeheartedly accepting sacramental retrieval, it is important to listen to the concerns from theological traditions that have been critical of the sacramental life of established churches. In this article, I present two quite different examples: the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck, and the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and his ecclesiological thinking in the 1970s and 1980s. Both are highly critical of the focus on priestly actions and the model of Christendom as the context for the sacraments. From these two examples, I argue for a humble ontology that not just celebrates life as a gift, but also accepts creation's ambiguity, and stresses God's eschatological calling in judgement and transformation. A humbler ontology draws attention to those churchly actions that mediate the inbreaking of God's kingdom.

## Key words:

Sacramental theology; Pilgram Marpeck; Leonardo Boff; Hans Boersma; ontology of peace

## Introduction

Sacramental theology is currently experiencing an ongoing renewal. From being a limited topic in dogmatic treatments of baptism and the Lord's Supper, it has become a key concept in the ecclesial renewal within the Catholic Church and ecumenical dialogues.<sup>1</sup> Increasingly, it is also used to oppose the present exploitation of creation. Not merely bread and wine, and not only the church, but all creation can be a sacrament that mediates God's presence and grace. This sacramental ethos is intimately connected with a renewed interest in Patristic theology and the Orthodox tradition. In a recent book, John

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<sup>1</sup> See 'Dogmatic Constitution on the Church', I.1, *Documents of Vatican II*, ed. by Austin P. Flannery (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), p. 350.

Chryssavgis claims that, in Orthodox faith, ‘the human person is primarily and essentially a liturgical celebrant of this sacramental reality of the world’.<sup>2</sup>

The renewal of sacramental theology is not limited to older theological traditions. Increasingly, it is visible in theologies that have been critical of sacramental traditions such as Anabaptists, Congregationalists, Pentecostals, and Baptists.<sup>3</sup> One outspoken representative of this shift is the evangelical theologian Hans Boersma, until recently the J. I. Packer Professor of Theology at Regent College in Vancouver. He strongly laments that his own evangelical tradition has accepted the modern bifurcation between the natural and the supernatural. In particular, he criticises the tendency to limit God’s presence to individual experiences and some miraculous events. With the help of *Nouvelle Théologie* and Orthodox theology, he argues for the retrieval of a sacramental worldview: ‘created objects are sacraments that participate in the mystery of the heavenly reality of Jesus Christ.’<sup>4</sup>

Boersma’s retrieval of a sacramental worldview has far-reaching consequences for the church and its practices. Ontological convictions and practices are interrelated. He laments that Evangelicals neglect the Eucharist and that they cannot appreciate the importance of the social practices of the church. According to Boersma’s critique, in the Evangelical tradition, God’s grace is always seen as extrinsic to the material reality of bread and water and ecclesial structures; and such

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<sup>2</sup> John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament: Reflections on Ecology and Spirituality* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 2019), p. 4. Pope Francis writes as follows in his Encyclical Letter ‘Laudato Si’: ‘The Sacraments are a privileged way in which nature is taken up by God to become a means of mediating supernatural life. [...] this is especially clear in the spirituality of the Christian East.’ (Pope Francis, ‘Laudato Si’, *The Holy See*, 24 May 2015: <[http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco\\_20150524\\_enciclica-laudato-si.html](http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html)\" \1\"\_ftnref164> [accessed 23 March 2022] (§235).

<sup>3</sup> See for example, Anthony R. Cross and Philip E. Thompson, eds, *Baptist Sacramentalism: Studies in Baptist History and Thought* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2007); Curtis Freeman, *Contesting Catholicity: Theology for Other Baptists* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2014); Daniel Tomberlin, *Pentecostal Sacraments: Encountering God at the Altar* (Cleveland: Cherohala Press, 2019); John D. Rempel, *Recapturing an Enchanted World: Ritual and Sacrament in the Free Church Tradition* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020).

<sup>4</sup> See Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2011), p. 8.

worldly things cannot participate in and mediate the spiritual presence of God. Thus, little room remains for any real sacraments. The church is left with some ‘ordinances’ that Jesus Christ commanded the church to do in memory of him. According to Boersma, this situation has created a rather barren worship without the mystery of the Eucharist service. For Boersma, a sacrament is no mere sign. It participates in the heavenly reality to which it points, and so it can open human eyes to God’s presence in all creation. The water in baptism as well as the bread and wine in the Eucharist connects these sacramental acts with the rest of the material cosmos. With reference to Alexander Schmemmann, Boersma states, “The entire cosmos is meant to serve as a sacrament: a material gift from God in and through which we enter into the joy of his heavenly presence.”<sup>5</sup>

This article explores such interconnections between sacramental practices and ontology in present sacramental theology. I regard the sacramental retrieval as an essential and valuable contribution that can alter historical constraints within Boersma’s Evangelicalism as well as among Baptists and in similar movements.<sup>6</sup> As Boersma states, a mere symbolic interpretation of the sacraments has too often accepted the modern bifurcation that reduces the presence of God to a private and spiritual realm. However, before wholeheartedly embracing his and similar sacramental retrievals, I think it is important to remember the concerns from theological traditions that have been critical of the sacramental practices of established churches. The argument I put forward in what follows is that these critical voices imply a more ambiguous understanding of reality which creates a more open and diverse space for human existence. In contrast to a harmonious analogy between heaven and earth in Boersma’s Platonist-Christian synthesis, this critical perspective is to a greater extent eschatological and, consequently, indicates other approaches for the renewal of the sacramental practices of the church than those suggested by Boersma.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> See Roland Spjuth, *Creation, Contingency, and Divine Presence in the Theologies of Thomas F. Torrance and Eberhard Jüngel*, *Studia Theologica Lundensia* 51 (Lund: Lund University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> For Boersma’s definition of Platonist-Christian Synthesis, see Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, pp. 5–7, 33–39.

In this article, I present two quite different examples of such critical voices. First, I describe the sixteenth-century Anabaptist Pilgram Marpeck and, second, the liberation theologian Leonardo Boff and his ecclesiological thinking in the 1970s and 1980s. Although numerous other figures could have served as the focus of this study, I have nevertheless chosen these two theologians as they offer perspectives from within dissimilar theological traditions and contexts. More specifically, whereas one figure stands outside of the dominant church establishment, the other works from within it.<sup>8</sup> Despite this difference, I find it notable that there are striking similarities between these figures regarding both their critiques and their attempts to develop a sacramental interpretation of the church from the bottom up, that is, from the local gathering of believers that stands in tension with the dominant powers at play within society and institutional church (*Christendom*). Namely, both figures understand the church in its true form to be a *diaspora church* scattered in vital communities and thus ‘reverting to the minority or diaspora status of the first centuries’.<sup>9</sup> Whatever affiliation a theologian might have, I find it mandatory to listen to the concerns that can be raised from within such an ecclesial perspective.

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<sup>8</sup> His two books analysed in this article were written before he was criticised by Pope John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger, leader of *the Sacred Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith*, in 1984–1985. It is beyond the scope of this article to evaluate the extent to which this critique is fair or whether Boff’s ecclesiology has a place within Roman Catholicism. The subsequent silencing of Boff led to his resignation from the priesthood and from the Franciscan order in 1992. For an overview of the Vatican view of Liberation Theology at that time see Peter Hebblethwaite, ‘Liberation Theology and the Roman Catholic Church’, in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 179–198.

<sup>9</sup> George A. Lindbeck, *The Church in a Postliberal Age*, ed. by James J. Buckley (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 122. Boff uses the concept explicitly. I have not found the notion in Marpeck, but today it is often used to describe Anabaptist ecclesiology. See John H. Yoder, *The Jewish-Christian Schism Revisited*, ed. by Michael G. Cartwright (London: SCM, 2003). It is also used by several modern theologians to describe the shift after the Christendom era in the West where the church again lives as a minority in a secular society. See, the famous comments by Karl Rahner in Gerald A. McCool, *A Rahner Reader* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd 1975), pp. 305–09.

## The Event of God's Presence in Pilgram Marpeck

In this section I will first describe the Anabaptist leader Pilgram Marpeck's critique of the sacramental practices of the dominating churches and then argue that this critique is interrelated to some basic ontological convictions, even though these convictions are seldom explicated in ontological statements. Marpeck is chosen as he is the author of the longest and most detailed document of the Anabaptists' view of baptism and the Lord's Supper, *The Admonition (Vermanung)*, published in 1542.<sup>10</sup>

Marpeck was born in Rattenberg in approximately 1495 and was a highly qualified engineer and organiser. Perhaps thanks to his skill, he was one of the few first-generation Anabaptist leaders who survived to die a natural death, which for him came in Augsburg in 1556. *The Admonition* is his attempt to unify the divergent Anabaptist movement under one confession. The text also illustrates the main differences between the Anabaptists and other Christian traditions. During his life, Marpeck had several penetrating discussions with different reformers, such as Martin Bucer of Strasbourg, and with radical spiritualists<sup>11</sup> such as Caspar Schwenckfeld. The critique in *The Admonition* rejects at least three aspects within the sacramental practices he confronted: infant baptism, the focus on priestly actions, and the model of Christendom as the context for the sacraments.

### *The Necessity of Faith*

The first and most obvious critique of the existing ecclesial views was Marpeck's rejection of infant baptism. He was convinced that the great tragedy in the history of the church was the loss of a clear connection between baptism and a personal confession of faith. The sacramental life of the medieval church in no way compensated for this loss of faith and discipleship. Children were baptised, and people participated in the Eucharist but without any transformed attitude or commitment. Thus,

<sup>10</sup> Pilgram Marpeck, 'The Admonition of 1542', in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, trans. and ed. by William Klaassen and Walter Klaassen (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1978), pp. 159–302.

<sup>11</sup> Radical spiritualists were one branch within the Radical Reformation who insisted on immediate revelation from the Spirit rather than on mediation through Scripture, sacraments, and priests.

the Anabaptists concluded that the sacraments, such as the rite of baptism and the Lord's Supper, cannot mediate grace independent of a person's conscious response. In this way, they rejected the notion *ex opere operato*. Baptism in water becomes a witness to the Spirit's baptism that has already taken place within the person. Likewise, *The Admonition* severely criticises the popular understanding of the Mass as 'mystified and obscured', a view that considers the bread and wine as 'equal to the being and essence of God'.<sup>12</sup> As other Anabaptists, Marpeck argued that a true Lord's Supper presupposes that the participants *remember* Jesus Christ and are committed to loving one another in the body of Christ.

The obvious risk within the Anabaptist tradition is that it places the sacraments solely within the realm of human *response*. As Boersma argues, Anabaptists often presupposed an ontological barrier separating spirit and matter that limited the sacraments' possibility of expressing a material mediation of grace. However, in contrast to several other Anabaptists, *The Admonition* does not take this path. Marpeck not only opposes Catholics and Magisterial Reformers, who place a high expectation on outer things, but also constantly confronts spiritualists who reject all use of external ceremonies. Already during his stay in Strasbourg, approximately 1528–1532, this standpoint had compelled him to oppose spiritualists who exerted a strong attraction on several radicals who were exasperated with churches fighting each other over external matters such as governance and sacraments.<sup>13</sup>

Marpeck stresses that humans have a direct relationship to the risen Christ through the Spirit. However, in contrast with spiritualists, he also emphasises the humanity of Jesus Christ and the doctrine of the incarnation.<sup>14</sup> The incarnation implies that the Spirit continues to appear

<sup>12</sup> Marpeck, 'The Admonition', p. 262 f.

<sup>13</sup> Marpeck wrote his first booklet against such groups from within his Anabaptist community: 'A Clear Refutation' in Marpeck, *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. by Klassen and Klassen, pp. 43–67. 'The Admonition' also opened a long-lasting debate between him and Caspar Schwenckfeld.

<sup>14</sup> For Marpeck's Christological understanding of the sacraments see Neal Blough, 'The Holy Spirit and Discipleship in Pilgram Marpeck's Theology', in *Essays in Anabaptist Theology*, ed. by H. Wayne Pipkin (Elkhart: Institute of Mennonite Studies, 1994), pp. 133–145 and John Rempel, *The Lord's Supper in Anabaptism: A Study in the Christology of Balthasar Hubmaier, Pilgram Marpeck, and Dirk Philips* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1993).

in the same historical and material forms as it did during the lifetime of Jesus. The humanity of Christ is extended through the church when it takes the same shape as Christ, that is, when Christians faithfully follow Christ as his disciples. The inner work of the Spirit is always related to the same outer form that it had in the humanity of Jesus. The historical extension of the body of Christ and the presence of the Spirit, the outer and inner, must unite. Mennonite scholar John Rempel summarises the Trinitarian logic of his thought: ‘Thus, the church is the humanity of Christ, outwardly doing the ceremonies which the Spirit inwardly fulfills.’<sup>15</sup> Thus, an inward baptism of the Spirit cannot be divorced from its external sign in a water baptism. In contrast to spiritualists, Marpeck argues that salvation is no mere spiritual event but one that happens in history through water, community, and discipleship.

Marpeck claims that the work of the Spirit cannot happen without the outer sign. *The Admonition* therefore states that ‘baptism is actually a sacrament; it is something sacred and it entails commitment. Through baptism, a man commits himself or obligates himself with respect to an action of God.’<sup>16</sup> Therefore, even if he, as other Anabaptists, rarely uses the notion sacrament, he concludes with a rather powerful affirmation of the importance of the ordinances. ‘Whoever has the truth in his heart, the truth which is pointed to and signified by the external sign, for him it is no sign at all, but rather one essential union [*wesen*] with the inner.’<sup>17</sup> Thus, his critique of infant baptism does not reject the mediation of grace through material reality but rather rejects all form of compulsion in matters of faith. Below I will argue that such stance also has ontological implications.

### *The Coming Together of the Community*

The second aspect of Marpeck’s critique is that he strongly objects to traditions that primarily connect the sacraments with priestly actions; instead, his emphasis is on the believers’ community. *The Admonition* gives little attention to the role of the priest in the Lord’s Supper and

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<sup>15</sup> Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, p. 107. However, Marpeck’s attempt to hold together inner and outer is precarious, and Rempel shows his difficulties in upholding this Trinitarian logic in his further discussion with Caspar Schwenckfeld, pp. 127–142.

<sup>16</sup> Marpeck, ‘The Admonition’, p. 181.

<sup>17</sup> Marpeck, ‘The Admonition’, p. 194.

baptism. John Rempel writes, ‘However, it is the congregation which does the action. The Spirit is present in their action, transforming them so that they are reconstituted as the body of Christ.’<sup>18</sup> Similarly, baptism is depicted as a communal event. ‘Baptism shall serve this end, that Christ’s church, through baptism, be joined together, *formed*, and united in one body of love.’<sup>19</sup> Baptism is described as *the door* or *the entrance* into the church through which a person is included within Christ’s body. Communion with Christ is fundamentally connected with the inclusion of people into his fellowship.

Walter Klaassen observes that the Anabaptists in general regarded a discussion about what is happening to the elements ‘as totally beside the point, and switched the discussion to a consideration of the presence of Christ in the “body” of believers.’<sup>20</sup> The presence of Christ in the Lord’s Supper does not transform the elements but remakes a human community. Thus, Marpeck locates what happens during communion as God and humans coming together as one body. He assumes a profound interrelation between vertical and horizontal reconciliation. Gift and obedience, Spirit and discipleship — these aspects cannot be separated in true communion. Other aspects, including how to properly handle the elements, are secondary.

Marpeck’s emphasis on the community rather than on priestly actions also indicates a broader understanding of what can be called sacramental actions. Since *The Admonition* focuses on baptism and the Lord’s Supper as actions that the community performs together, it follows that other actions, such as church discipline (the ban) or economic sharing, also become important since these, too, are essential for the constitution of the common life. Loving each other implies that participants admonish and encourage each other and share all things in common.<sup>21</sup> Rempel shows that Marpeck’s corpus includes varying lists

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<sup>18</sup> Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> Marpeck, ‘The Admonition’, p. 294 (emphasis original).

<sup>20</sup> Walter Klaassen, ed., *Anabaptism in Outline: Selected Primary Sources* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1981), p. 190.

<sup>21</sup> Nowhere is the notion of community stronger than in connection with ‘the ban’ and the authority of ‘the key’. The *Schleitheim Confession* of 1527 already testifies to the centrality of the ban. See *The Schleitheim Confession*, trans. and ed. by John H. Yoder (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1977). However, Marpeck strongly objects to those groups who make it mandatory to have

of ‘ceremonies’, but none of them list only the Lord’s Supper and baptism. They also include among other things, Scripture, the ban, rebuke, exhortation, prayer, example, proclamation, and teaching.<sup>22</sup> Jesus Christ is mediated through such external acts of the church. The significance of this broad definition of the actions that mediate God’s grace is, according to Rempel, to oppose spiritualistic interpretations. In comparison to the Magisterial Reformation, such a broad understanding highlights rather than devalues the historical and physical mediation of grace. The question is not whether Christ is present in his body; rather, it is *how* and *where* Christ is present.

A broader understanding of the practices of the church can be described as a democratic impulse grounded in the commitment to the priesthood of all believers. Marpeck, in his *Confession* from 1532, states that in ‘this house of Christ, there is no lord after the flesh, but only vassals and servants of Christ Jesus, for He Himself served. There is no Christian magistrate except Christ Himself.’<sup>23</sup> Every true believer is the child of God, thus they all ‘have authority, so that whatever they loose on earth is loosed and free in heaven, and what they have bound on earth is bound in heaven (Mt 18:18)’.<sup>24</sup> The highest authority of appeal in conflicts is not the priest or the preachers but the whole community coming together in the Spirit. Such a broad understanding of church practices also has important ontological implications, to which I shall return at the end of the article.

### *An Eschatological Community*

The broad sacramental life of the Anabaptists constituted the church as a social reality. The human life of Jesus Christ continues as a *common, outward way of life*; as such, it is a visible body that challenges the surrounding society. For a long time, Europe had been Christian. The visibility of the church was the church buildings and the ministers who

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common property, as in the Hutterite tradition. For Marpeck, this is also a kind of external force that violates the logic of God’s peaceful incarnation.

<sup>22</sup> Rempel, *The Lord’s Supper in Anabaptism*, p. 98. See for example Marpeck’s first work from 1531, ‘A Clear Refutation’, in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. by Klassen and Klassen, pp. 43–68 (p. 52).

<sup>23</sup> Marpeck, ‘Pilgram Marpeck’s Confession of 1532’, in *The Writings of Pilgram Marpeck*, ed. by Klassen and Klassen, pp. 107–157 (p. 149).

<sup>24</sup> Marpeck, ‘Pilgram Marpeck’s Confession of 1532’, p. 112.

were appointed to serve those belonging to this Christian society (the so-called model of Christendom). The revolutionary idea in the Anabaptist tradition was that their practices created a new kind of community — only for those who freely wanted to be part of it.

The Anabaptists interpreted this tension with the surrounding society in eschatological terms. They sought the kingdom of God, and they were convinced that this kingdom stands in tension with the social order that dominates ‘the world’. Marpeck states that those belonging to the community of believers, ‘must first deny and disown the devil, the world, and all that is a part of it, *as well as die to all vanity, pride, and all lusts of the flesh*’.<sup>25</sup> The Lord’s Supper requires an economical sharing with others that goes beyond normal social divisions. Their refusal of all kinds of violence made their ordinary life distinctive. Such acts are not merely secondary consequences from saved individuals. Rather, redemptions happen when the inner work of the Spirit takes form as a new community that already has a share in something of the future that Jesus Christ inaugurated. In a culture of Christendom, the radical witness and practices necessarily created an eschatological tension between the present order and the kingdom of Christ. This conflict with the powers of the world caused Marpeck and other Anabaptists immense suffering. However, according to them, the power of Christ is expressed in suffering. Since the Father of Jesus Christ is humble and not violent, the mediation of grace is always connected with peaceful living.

### *Ontology of Peace*

This short assessment of *The Admonition* shows a remarkable resemblance with much modern sacramental theology in its critique of a reductive and hierarchical interpretation of the sacramental life of the church.<sup>26</sup> Hans Boersma argues, with reference to Henri de Lubac, that the great failure of medieval theology was to forget the close interrelation between the Eucharist and the church. The Eucharist was

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<sup>25</sup> Marpeck, ‘The Admonition’, p. 294 (emphasis original).

<sup>26</sup> For the similarities between Marpeck and the ecclesiology of the Vatican II Council see Neal Blough, ‘The Church as Sign or Sacrament: Trinitarian Ecclesiology, Pilgram Marpeck, Vatican II and John Milbank’, *The Mennonite Quarterly Review*, 78 (January 2004), 29–52.

distorted into a miraculous transformation of the elements rather than an event in which the sacramental presence of Christ transformed the people into one body. Boersma claims ‘a mystery, in the old sense of the word, is more of an action than a thing’.<sup>27</sup> This definition comes very close to the wording used in *The Admonition*. In this text, ‘a true ordinance’ is an *event* in which the inner work of the Spirit and the outer work of the body of Christ join in ‘one essential union’. Thus, the important question raised in Marpeck’s ecclesiology is not whether a practice of the church is a sacrament or not, but what kind of churchly activities mediate God’s presence and testify to the kingdom of God.

However, my main argument is not whether Anabaptist tradition offers resources for sacramental retrieval. Anabaptism is deeply ambiguous in this respect.<sup>28</sup> My concern is rather to listen to their critique of the sacramental practices they faced in the Catholic Church and the Magisterial Reformation. One such essential critique is the loss of the connection between sacramental rites, faith, and discipleship. The critique does not have merely obvious ecclesial consequences. In relation to the present sacramental retrieval, it also has ontological implications that call into question the kind of sacramental ontology that Boersma and others celebrate.

According to Stephen B. Boyd, the importance of faith and discipleship corresponds with a deep Anabaptist distrust of all physical forces in matters of faith. The civil power of the sword always stands in contrast to the power of the Spirit.<sup>29</sup> The Anabaptist did not question the need for worldly rulers or the use of the sword in earthly matters. However, in the kingdom of God, ‘there is no coercion, but rather voluntary spirit in Christ Jesus our Lord’.<sup>30</sup> In him, God is revealed as

<sup>27</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, p. 116. Additionally, compare John Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament*, p. 86.

<sup>28</sup> However, Thomas N. Finger claims that in ‘the most basic sense Anabaptist communities are deeply sacramental [...] Historical Anabaptists envisioned the church itself much as a sacrament’ (*A Contemporary Anabaptist Theology: Biblical, Historical, Constructive* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2004), p. 253).

<sup>29</sup> See Stephen B. Boyd, *Pilgrim Marpeck: His Life and Social Theology* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1992), p. 159. For Marpeck, this also implied an internal critique of churchly coercion through legalistic control.

<sup>30</sup> Marpeck, ‘Pilgrim Marpeck’s Confession of 1532’, p. 112 f.

humble and peaceful, not as a violent force that coerces people into obedience. The church is called to continue Christ's humble way of being present to the world. Thus, redemption must be presented as a free offer to humans who have real independence to accept or reject this divine offer in, for example, baptism.

Rather than seeing Marpeck as a protomodern theologian stressing human autonomy, I interpret his theological vision as opening an understanding of God's presence that takes the humble shape of the incarnated Son. The Platonist-Christian synthesis tends to stress harmony, analogical mediation between God and creation, and 'the many commonalities the believers and unbelievers share as a result of the goodness of God's created order in Christ'.<sup>31</sup> Marpeck's position, rather, stresses the tensions existing between different societies. God's grace is happening as a pneumatological and eschatological event that often stands in tension with what is seen as natural in the present. The practices within Christendom — such as the baptism of children, compulsory church membership, and obligatory participation in the Mass — indicate a theology of divine presence that does not leave sufficient space and time for the other. Thus, Marpeck's sacramental theology seems to imply an *ontology of peace* that affirms a more independent place for the created others, and the possibility of a more indefinite relation between God and creation. According to Marpeck's persecuted minority, there is no coercion in God's work of reconciliation. God is surely present and acts everywhere, but humans are always free to react to this divine gift.

My argument so far is that Marpeck's explication of the events where God's presence is mediated to humans implies an 'ontology of peace'. However, one might ask whether a critical voice from the sixteenth century is still relevant for the present retrieval of a sacramental theology. Thus, I turn to a more recent voice coming from within an explicit sacramental tradition.

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<sup>31</sup> Boersma, *Heavenly Participation*, p. 28. He writes, '[L]et me clarify that by no means do I locate myself theologically in the Anabaptist counter-culture tradition.'

## Sacrament as a Social Process in Leonardo Boff

The base community in Latin America is a complex phenomenon originating in the 1950s and 1960s, mainly due to the severe crisis caused by the lack of ordained ministries in the area. In response to this crisis, some clergy and religious leaders started helping laypeople organise themselves in small communities for celebration, biblical studies, and mutual support.<sup>32</sup> The liberation theologian Leonardo Boff is perhaps the one who has tried most systematically to generate an ecclesiology from these experiences in his books *EcclesioGenesis* (originally published in 1977) and *Church: Charism and Power* (originally published in 1981).<sup>33</sup> The theology of liberation and the origins of the base communities in Latin America are not identical. The base communities began earlier and are broader than liberation theology. I do not claim that Boff makes the most precise explication of the ecclesiological implications of this movement, even though he was one influential voice from within this context.<sup>34</sup> Rather, Boff has been chosen as *one* test case to see if some similar traits can be found between his books and my analysis of Marpeck's text. Certainly, sixteenth-century Anabaptist and liberation theologies differ vastly. Boff would probably find the foregoing analysis unduly concerned with the holiness of the church rather than with seeking the liberation of the poor wherever that is happening. And, of course, Boff does not reject the baptism of children. It is, therefore, of great interest that their criticism of the sacramental practices of the

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<sup>32</sup> The base communities did not arise spontaneously out of the base but were the result of the consciousness-raising activity of clergy and religious leaders. For the history, see, for example, Andrew Dawson, 'The Origins and Character of the Base Ecclesial Community: A Brazilian Perspective', in *The Cambridge Companion to Liberation Theology*, ed. by Christopher Rowland (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 109–128, and Philip Wingecier-Raygo, *Where Are the Poor? A Comparison of the Ecclesial Base Communities and Pentecostalism: A Case Study in Cuernavaca, Mexico* (Eugene, OR: Pickwick, 2011).

<sup>33</sup> Leonardo Boff, *EcclesioGenesis: The Base Communities Reinvent the Church* (London: Collins Liturgical Publications, 1986) and Boff, *Church: Charism and Power: Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church* (London: SCM Press, 1985).

<sup>34</sup> Boff presented his ecclesial ideas of the later book *EcclesioGenesis* in a very influential paper at the Second National Base Community Conference in Brazil in 1976 (Dawson, 'The Origins and Character of the Base Ecclesial Community', p. 121). Sturla Stålsett states that Boff has done 'the pioneer work in Liberation-theological ecclesiology' and 'has had to pay the price' ('Liberation Theology', in *Key Theological Thinkers*, ed. by Staale Johannes Kristiansen and Svein Rise (Surrey: Ashgate, 2013), pp. 617–630 (p. 626)).

church is remarkably similar. In this section I describe these similarities before explicating the implications of this critique in the final section of the article.

### *The Community of the Faithful*

First, Marpeck and Boff closely resemble one another in their criticism of the practices of the church. According to Boff, the main problem with the Latin tradition is that the church became increasingly identified with clericalism, so the church became synonymous with the hierarchy of priests. The priests mediated the grace of God that the laity received. This situation created a division between those who ‘produce’ and those who ‘consume’. Boff even describes this as a kind of alienation, in which the church is *only* rites and sacraments.<sup>35</sup> In contrast to such hierarchical assumptions, he emphasises that the church is constituted of personal, face-to-face meetings. The base communities are ‘birthing the church anew’ — *ecclesiogenesis*. ‘We are not dealing with the expansion of an existing ecclesiastical system, rotating on a sacramental, clerical axis, but with the emergence of another form of being church, rotating on the axis of the word and the laity.’<sup>36</sup> In contrast to most of the priests and the religious leaders who started training laypeople in base communities, Boff emphasises that these communities are not merely movements within the church, they are full expressions of the church. Thus, he prefers to speak of ‘base *ecclesial* communities’.

Boff’s critique does not imply that he, like the Anabaptists, discard the Catholic tradition. It is important for him to remain within the Catholic Church, and he underlines that grace must be mediated through the historical and institutional church. However, from a position within the church, he seeks a subversion and renewal of traditional structures.<sup>37</sup> Like many others, he claims to continue the *aggiornamento* (‘bringing up to date’) begun with the Second Vatican Council. With reference to the Council, he makes the people of God,

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<sup>35</sup> Boff, *Church*, p. 132.

<sup>36</sup> Boff, *Ecclesiogenesis*, p. 2.

<sup>37</sup> From another perspective, Ivan Illich develops very much the same criticism out of his Latin American experiences. See ‘The Vanishing Clergyman’, *The Critic*, 25 (1967), 18–27.

not the hierarchy, the central axis in his ecclesiology. For him, this implies ‘a democratisation’ in which the church becomes a free and fraternal community with the participation of the greatest number. Without denying the institutional aspects of the church, he writes, ‘[B]ut the church is also an event. It emerges, is born, and is continually reshaped whenever individuals meet to hear the word of God, believe in it, and vow together to follow Jesus Christ, inspired by the Holy Spirit.’<sup>38</sup> The church happens among persons who respond to God’s offer. Thus, all people are equally the people of God. ‘All share in Christ, directly and without mediation.’<sup>39</sup>

Boff comes very close to the ecclesiology of Pilgram Marpeck. Like him, Boff does not trust that the bishop and the eucharistic rite create the church. Instead, the living Christ through the Spirit calls the people of God together into a community. Like Marpeck, he rejects the spiritualistic utopia of a community without power and institution. Boff was convinced that the community must always have leaders, institutional structures, and a relationship with the global church and its history. Ecclesial institutions and the communitarian dimension must coexist. However, in relation to his tradition, Boff inverts the relation between those aspects, so the church is thought of from ‘the bottom up, from the grassroots, from the “base”’.<sup>40</sup> The risen Christ, present in the Spirit, calls people into community directly. The church is the sacrament of the Holy Spirit. However, he does not speak of the church as a kind of prolongation of the incarnate Christ, as in Marpeck’s theology. Boff connects such an idea with a Catholic stress on the institution and not, as Marpeck does, with people following Jesus Christ. Instead, Boff emphasises the Spirit. For him, it implies a less rigid church, one that freely adapts to different circumstances and depends on the work of the Spirit in the lives of all believers. Again, he claims that the church is more of an event than an institution.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Boff, *Church*, p. 127.

<sup>39</sup> Boff, *Church*, p. 133. The same is stated in Boff, *Ecclesiology*, p. 11.

<sup>40</sup> Boff, *Ecclesiology*, p. 15.

<sup>41</sup> Boff, *Church*, p. 155. For similar statements see also pp. 144–153 and Boff, *Ecclesiology*, p. 19.

*The Charismatic Community*

A second similarity is that Boff also has a broader view of the sacramental life of the church. As a Catholic theologian, he clearly states that grace and salvation are always expressed in a sacramental form. It never comes 'like a bolt from the blue'; it must be made visible. However, the problem arises when this visibility is identified with the hierarchy and their activities. According to Boff, *charisma* is the organising principle of the church. The living Christ through the Spirit creates a community by giving charisma to all people. This phenomenon implies a basic equality: all are sent, and all have responsibilities within the church. Of course, not everyone can do everything. There is a manifold charisma, and through this interdependence, the Spirit constitutes the 'church-as-community'.<sup>42</sup>

Boff's charismatic vision of the church means the co-responsibility of all in the uplifting of the church. Baptism makes the entire people of God priestly. Like Marpeck, Boff argues that the sacramental life of the church cannot be limited to the seven traditional acts in the Catholic tradition. He writes, 'It is beginning to recover from the sacramental amnesia of the Church, brought about by the limitation of the entire sacramental structure to the seven sacraments, at the Council of Trent.'<sup>43</sup> In the base ecclesial communities, the grace of God is also mediated through visible acts as 'community coordination, catechesis, organizing the liturgy, caring for the sick, teaching people to read and write, looking after the poor'.<sup>44</sup> However, the centre and essence of all is always the celebration of faith. He states that it is hunger for the word of God that brings people together. When they read and celebrate their common faith, the experience becomes the 'horizon' through which everything else is understood. The sacramental life must thus do justice to God's all-embracing reality, 'making it possible to see

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<sup>42</sup> The most controversial aspect of Boff's position is his argument that the celebration of the Eucharist is a function within the collegiality that belongs to the whole people of God. As a full expression of the church, a base community has the mandate to appoint a man *or a woman* to that function. For Boff's argument for the right of women to be priests, see Boff, *Ecclesio-genesis*, pp. 76–97.

<sup>43</sup> Boff, *Church*, p. 120.

<sup>44</sup> Boff, *Ecclesio-genesis*, p. 23.

even the political and the economic as mediation of God's grace or of dis-grace'.<sup>45</sup>

*The Sacramental Life as a Social Process*

Finally, Boff's broad understanding of the sacramental life represents the church's practices as a social process standing in tension with other social structures. The church is a channel for the type of integral liberation that is so heavily stressed within liberation theology.<sup>46</sup> Too often, sacramental acts are reduced to the intimate and spiritual realm, separate from the social sphere. Priests are defined by *their power to consecrate*, restricted to a cultic sphere. Instead, Boff states, the sacramental life of the church needs to be a *social process* building 'more humane social relationships' that can testify to reconciliation and peace in the Kingdom of God.<sup>47</sup>

Like many in the Free Church tradition, Boff detected a basic reason for the problems in the Constantinian Church. Instead of opposing the influence of the pagans, it adapted to the structures of the empire. 'It offered the empire an ideology that supported the existing order.'<sup>48</sup> Instead of transforming the empire, the church reproduced the structure of the ruling class. Clergy became a ruling class claiming monopoly of the exercise of religious power, while the laity were reduced to an obedient and submissive force in church as in society. To be a channel of the kingdom that Jesus Christ inaugurated, a church must be characterised by kinship, participation, and communion. It must regain this alternative vision of the world opposing that of the ruling class. Such a church stands in tension with powers and rulers. It must be *a church of the diaspora*.<sup>49</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, p. 40 f.

<sup>46</sup> For its classical expression, see Gustavo Gutierrez, *A Theology of Liberation: History, Politics, and Salvation* (London: SCM, 1973), pp. 69–72.

<sup>47</sup> Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, p. 38.

<sup>48</sup> Boff, *Church*, p. 50.

<sup>49</sup> Boff, *EcclesioGenesis*, p. 119. There is a tension between Boff's emphasis on the church as an alternative social community and his understanding of politics as statecraft. In general, liberation theology had an apolitical church, which means that the Christian struggle for justice was by means of statecraft. See Daniel Bell's important study, *Liberation Theology after the End of History: The Refusal to Cease Suffering* (London: Routledge, 2001), pp. 62–74.

We have seen three aspects where Marpeck's and Boff's critique of the sacramental practices of the church are remarkable similar. Of course, these critical perspectives are not a fair presentation of the diversity and richness in the Christian tradition. However, I think they pinpoint some dangers existing in sacramental traditions. As there always exists an interrelation between theology and practice, it is mandatory to ask in what manner their critique may affect our present sacramental theology.

## Conclusions

Sacramental retrieval is an important and valuable contribution to present ecclesiology and ontology. Ontological convictions have practical implications, and practices shape our basic social imaginations. Since theology and practices always are interrelated, I have argued that, before wholeheartedly embracing the present retrieval of a sacramental ontology, we must evaluate the critique of the practices that have dominated sacramental traditions. I have presented Pilgram Marpeck and Leonardo Boff as two examples of such critiques. Drawing on these two examples I now move to raise some qualifications regarding the employment of sacramental theology in relation to both ecclesiology and ontology. First, I summarise how the critiques of Marpeck and Boff serve to modify sacramental ontology, and second, I discuss how such a modification thereby leads us to emphasise ecclesial practices that would otherwise receive inadequate attention.<sup>50</sup>

### *Sacramental Ontology, Creation and Eschatology*

The present sacramental retrieval highlights creation as a divine gift and an analogical mediation of God's presence in all creations. Undoubtedly, this concept is one important aspect of a Christian ontology, and it has crucial implications in relation to the present devastation of creation. However, the rejection of Christendom as the context for sacramental practices implies an ontology of peace. The Christian God is peaceful

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<sup>50</sup> It is worth noticing that it is Boff's earlier works that I am analysing and it can be asked whether his later ecological and panentheistic world-view is consistent with this earlier position. Compare Boff, *Cry of the Earth, Cry of the Poor* (Maryknoll: New York: Orbis Books, 2004).

and not violent. Only as relatively independent beings are humans free to respond to divine love. In that case, the history of creation must also be seen as fragile, unfinished, changing, fallen, and ambiguous. This viewpoint is not intended to question the presence and power of God in all reality. Instead, it stresses God's humble presence.<sup>51</sup> When the church testifies to God's universal presence in all creation, it also accepts that this belief is not self-evident. For others, such a conviction seems irrational or superfluous. Life is a divine gift that has been given a relative degree of independence, which also makes life deeply ambiguous. Thus, in contrast to the cultures of Christendom, a theology of *diaspora* does not stress a harmonious analogy between heaven and earth.

Further, sacramental practices as a social process accentuate the tensions that exist between different communities. These tensions imply that a Christian ontology must be emphatically eschatological. In a Platonic-Christian synthesis, eschatology is often connected with the restoration of creation, occurring as a kind of final causality working within history towards fulfilment (the so-called *exitus-reditus* scheme). Conversely, the tradition of the diaspora focuses on *the events* in which the future of God interrupts and transforms human relations into an analogical likeness with the future kingdom. The presence of God is manifest in the Spirit's call challenging creation to move forward towards its transcendent goal in divine communion. In addition, this mediation is as much about God's judgement of the present order, including everything sinful in the church, as it is a wondrous affirmation of God's presence in everything. The future kingdom of peace, reconciliation, joy, and justice always stands in certain tension with the present orders and structures.

Sacramental ontology is an important protest against a spirituality that has been otherworldly and caught up in modern bifurcations between spirit and matter, supernatural and natural, church and everyday life. However, in its protest against secularity, it overstates its limits when it is formulated as a general ontology. Instead, I argue for a more diversified and humble ontology celebrating life as a gift,

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<sup>51</sup> Compare how Katherine Sonderegger joins God's omnipotence with humility, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Doctrine of God* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2015), pp. 151–332.

accepting creation's ambiguity and responsibility, and stressing the Spirit's eschatological working in judgement and transformation. This ontology accepts living within the tensions between praising the God who is present, lamenting God's hiddenness, and longing for a life in greater correspondence with the coming of the Lord.<sup>52</sup>

### *Renewing Ecclesial Vision and Practices*

A humbler ontology is interrelated with ecclesial practices. Hans Boersma emphasises the liturgical celebration and its possibilities to transform human seeing. According to him, the main problem within the present church is its barren worship.<sup>53</sup> Similarly, John Chryssavgis writes from his Orthodox perspective concerning the ecological challenge, 'Paradoxically, ecological corrections may in fact begin with environmental in-action or mere awareness. It is a matter of contemplation, of *seeing* things differently.'<sup>54</sup> A humbler ontology, focused more on ambiguity and eschatological tensions, would not stress a kind of platonic contemplation (*theoria*); rather, it would ask what *actions* (*phronesis*) correspond to the inbreaking of God's kingdom.

Leonardo Boff and Pilgram Marpeck both argue that the sacramental life of the church too often legitimises the present order and the dominant power structures. People go to church to receive sacraments, but they have not been empowered to become a community that transforms lives and circumstances. In the present retrieval of sacramental theology, this challenge is worth listening to. The claim of Marpeck and Boff is that this mediation happens only in a community in which everyone matters in terms of celebration, decision-making, and mission. A strong focus on traditional sacrament still has the obvious

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<sup>52</sup> An important example for living within such tension is Søren Kierkegaard's attack on his own Christian Danish culture. For an important study of the 'sacred tension' in his thought, see Matthew T. Nowachek, 'Living within the Sacred Tension: Kierkegaard's Climacean Works as a Guide for Christian Existence', *Heythrop Journal*, 55, no. 5 (2014), 883–902.

<sup>53</sup> Compare his new book, Boersma, *Seeing God: The Beatific Vision in Christian Tradition* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2018).

<sup>54</sup> Chryssavgis, *Creation as Sacrament*, p. 133 (emphasis original). In relation to ecological crises, Chryssavgis emphasises the importance of 'Eastern contemplation' before 'Western activity' (*ibid.*, pp. 130–134). It may be significant that, when Chryssavgis concludes his book with a chapter on 'The Way Forward', it does not describe grass-roots activities but the examples of the Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew and Pope Francis.

risk, as in history, to forward a private and individualistic spirituality that does not challenge the present structures. To be a visible sign of God's peace, reconciliation, and justice, it is important to spotlight also those broader communal actions that are fundamental for upholding a just and peaceful community. That is not to question that the church always lives from the centre where it celebrates God's gifts in worship and the Lord's supper. However, the sacramental traditions have often limited the all-embracing challenge that the Spirit's eschatological presence brings to the present order. Again, the question is not whether God's grace is mediated through created reality but what kind of creational occurrences mediate the presence of the kingdom of God.

Marpeck and Boff focus on events when people together actively embrace God's eschatological gift in their fellowship and mission, including its political and economic relations. Such fragile responses seek to embody a peaceful, sustainable, and just community that creates possibilities for Christian fellowships to testify to new possibilities in new kinds of living.<sup>55</sup> Thus, I doubt that the main problem within the present church is its 'barren worship'. The great challenge remains the renewal of the church so that it, amidst its broken life, will, by God's grace, mediate the presence of the kingdom of God. In relation to ontological syntheses, it is worth remembering that the Messiah who was crucified and raised is still the fullest revelation of the Creator of heaven and earth.

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<sup>55</sup> Arne Rasmussen has, in several works, argued the importance of dissident Protestantism for social transformation since such thinkers put into practice new ways of living. See *The Church as Polis: From Political Theology to Theological Politics as Exemplified by Jürgen Moltmann and Stanley Hauerwas* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1995), and 'Radical Orthodoxy on Catholicism, Protestantism and Liberalism/Liberality: On the Use of Historical Narratives and Quantitative Methods in Political Theology', *Modern Theology*, 37, no. 1 (2021), 1–17.