

BREAKING THE FILTER

BY KIMBERLY HOPE BELCHER

If the liturgy is about a new way of seeing, about finding the light of Christ in which we too can see, what kind of liturgical practice is needed to develop this way of seeing? Most of the time, we see the world through a “sacred/secular” sorting filter. The filter works this way: we see the Eucharist, and we sort it as sacred, expressing this through our body language (bowing, genuflecting, the sign of the cross, gestures of prayer) and through our embodied affect (our attitude of mind, both evoking and evoked by these gestures, consisting of reverence, mindfulness, awe, and joy). We see a paper bag with sandwich, apple, juice, and chips, and we sort it

as secular, expressing this through our more casual treatment of this object with our body language and affect (and possibly by tossing leftovers in the trash). This is a useful distinction: it helps us remember and retain our reverence and awe for the transcendent, which we come “near to” when we touch sacred objects or do sacred actions. However, it stays useful only as long as there is a certain “slippage,” a certain looseness, to our categories. Because reverence is not meant to make God holy but to make us holy and, ultimately, to allow us to participate in God’s act of making the world holy.





Adam Naming the Animals
(12th c.); San Pietro a Valle,

image courtesy of ARTstor Slide Gallery
(University of California, San Diego).

J. R. R. Tolkien wrote quite a bit about the spiritual exercise that writing fiction about Middle-earth was for him. It was, of course, not at all like a vision in which the world and its history were revealed, of which he acted only as a recorder. Even a superficial look at the *History of Middle-earth* series makes it clear that Tolkien revised and redacted his works obsessively, changing both the large picture and tiny details, and he made some mistakes (heresy!) in fitting events and concepts together. Nevertheless, in this active engagement of systematizing and sorting, asking and critiquing and correcting, Tolkien had the *experience* that he was not inventing the world of Middle-earth but *discovering* it. It was not that Tolkien denied his own *agency* in creating the story, but rather that he felt that its world had a density that transcended his exercise of agency. The millions who have immersed themselves in and creatively developed the world since the original publication of the books might agree. Tolkien called this artistic participation in transcendence, in the naming that makes things holy, *sub-creation*.

Sub-creation is not the magical assertion that the transcendent author overrides one's own creative agency; on the contrary, it is the experience of placing one's own agency at the service of something larger, even if one only discovers what the larger reality is by creating. Something of the same kind happens in the liturgical immersion in life, when one's own agency is taken up into the creative power of the Holy Spirit. One knows, of course, that there is a difference between the Last Supper and this Tuesday's family dinner, a difference between the Eucharist and the sack lunch donated to the homeless. Yet at its best, this knowledge is porous, permitting the truth to slip in—the Last Supper was given so that this family too might be made holy by eating together; the sack lunch is a sacrament nourishing the image of Christ who was homeless.

The liturgy must encourage this slippage, must both train *and damage* our internal filter. It must arouse in us a recognition that we are encountering the holy, as, for instance, by the smell of incense. It must train us to respond with awe, reverence, and joy, with bendings and carols and the sign of the cross. But if the holy we recognize in the liturgy is *our* Holy One—the God of the living—it will not rest content in the church but will follow us out, so that we perceive it, out of the corner of our eyes, in a crowded movie theater, or seem to smell it in the dried fish market of a Chinatown grocery store. It is this alteration of perspective, the propensity to see God in the mundane or even the grotesque, that distinguished Mother Teresa, Thomas Merton, and Julian of Norwich. And it is by participating in liturgical sub-creation that we have our eyes opened to this holy vision.

In Acts, Peter has a vision in which God instructs him, against his religious training of careful food preparation and consumption, to “kill and eat” unclean animals, those against kosher law (cf. Acts 10:9–16). In the next chapter, Peter is able, because of this dream encounter, to recognize among the Gentiles—heresy!—the same Spirit that had been given to the Apostles. By Peter's violation of the holy law to be set apart, God assembles the first Church, “no longer Jew or Greek, . . . slave or free, . . . male [or] female; for all of you are one in Christ Jesus” (Gal 3:28–29).

By the slippery slope of the liturgical vision, we too must come to see the modern assembly, our neighbors, strangers, and unwanted guests, as

Sub-creator, the refracted light
Through whom is splintered from a single White
To many hues, and endlessly combined
In living shapes that move from mind to mind.¹

We generally see artistic creation as individualistic and solitary, but the liturgical creation of an assembly is a shared endeavor, as “from mind to mind” moves the conviction that Christ is in our midst. Although we often hear that we must recognize Christ in our neighbor, this cannot be a momentary exercise of imaginative hospitality, exhausted by a smiling handshake or directions to the cry room. Rather, pewmates must be invited to be sub-creators of the kingdom, sharing with us their vision of God and bringing it to life on the liturgical big screen. After all, Christ is not only our host in the Eucharist, but also our guest. When we welcome the stranger as Christ, not only ready to give but to receive gifts from the other, we are breaking the sacred/secular filter that allows us to see God only where we have given God permission to be.



NOTES

1 J.R.R. Tolkien, “On Fairy Stories” in *The Tolkien Reader* (New York: Ballantine, 1966), 74.



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