Liturgy as Sacramental Mystery: Incarnating Grace in the Space of Worldly Vulnerability

Philip J. Rossi
Marquette University, philip.rossi@marquette.edu

Liturgy as Sacramental Mystery

Incarnating Grace in the Space of Worldly Vulnerability

Philip J. Rossi, S.J.

1. Vulnerability: Obstacle or Invitation?

In his magisterial work, *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor has argued that belief in a transcendent, personal, and providential God, which had been the "default position" interwoven into the social imaginary\(^1\) — "the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others" — of the dominant Christian culture of the West for more than a millennium, has now become a "contested" option. Belief in the God of Jesus Christ is now just one of many points of reference on offer for the moral and spiritual orientation of human lives. Taylor further argues that this shift occurred during the course of modernity in consequence of complex historical processes that have brought about widespread cultural entrenchment of an altered social imaginary he terms "the immanent frame." The immanent frame has been constituted by a constellation of interlocking cosmic, social and moral orders of self-sufficient explanation, justification, and practice. It circumscribes all value and meaning into naturalistic terms that are entirely "this-worldly." It thus provides no space for meaning, value, or reference other than what emerges from the constructive activities of human intelligence working within the confines of what is empirically accessible and measurable.\(^2\) This natu-

\(^1\) He more fully defines a "social imaginary" as "the ways in which [people] imagine their social existence, how they fit together with others, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations which are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underlie these expectations," Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 171; see Chapter 4, "Modern Social Imaginaries," 159–211 and Modern Social Imaginaries, Durham, NC: Duke University Press 2004, for detailed discussions of this concept.

\(^2\) "Empirically accessible," of course, admits of a range of construals, some of which allow "religious experience" to fall within the scope of accessibility. The construal I am offering here, particularly with respect to what I later term the most "stringent" form of the immanent frame, is one for which such claims fall outside what counts as empirically accessible. I have tried to indicate this restrictive construal by the additional qualifier "measurable."
realistic circumscription relegates to the periphery of meaningful and credible discourse those ways of speaking that issue from religious modes of belief and practice, such as the monotheisms of the Abrahamic traditions, which affirm as divine an active, personal reality that transcends the constructive capacities of human intelligence upon empirical data; such a naturalistic perspective allows those modes of belief and practice a status that makes them, at best, historically contingent cultural practices properly confined to the sphere of what is “private” or, at worst, forms of illusion that have all too often been sources of destructive social conflict.

Concomitant with this eclipse of the transcendent has been the valorization of instrumental reason as the primary mode for engaging the impingements that the workings of the world’s contingency make upon the vulnerabilities of our human condition and for shaping our human sociality in terms of voluntarily undertaken relations. A crucial element in the valorization of instrumental reason has been an ever-deepening reliance on its power to extend human control over the full range of forces that impinge, curtail, or frustrate the achievement of the objects of our human projects. This sphere of instrumental control thus encompasses efforts to lessen and even eliminate the human vulnerabilities that render us subject to the impingement of the forces of the world that run athwart our purposes. In consequence, vulnerability stands within the immanent frame as an embarrassing consequence of our finitude, one that appropriate applications of instrumental reason should eventually enable us to overcome.

Over against the immanent frame’s perspective on vulnerability as an obstacle to be overcome, I will be proposing a counter-perspective upon vulnerability. From this counter-perspective, vulnerability is not an obstacle simply to be removed but provides instead a fundamental locus in which we are invited to enact a mutual welcoming central to our commitment to one another in human solidarity. My proposal will be articulated as an argument that this counter-perspective on vulnerability is central to the enactment of Christian liturgy: Liturgical enactment and participation enables us to transform our seeing of our human vulnerability, as it is embedded in the interplay of contingency, from an obstacle to our purposes to an invitation to the most profound human solidarity. Liturgy empowers a transformative seeing of our vulnerabilities in a way that the naturalism of the immanent frame all too often blocks. As a consequence of this transformation, we no longer see them as obstacles to human purposes; they instead now stand before us as markers of a human solidarity, which have been enfolded within the heal-

---

3 An important marker of the latter is the significant role that contractual models of the human social order have played in the political theories that articulate the moral structure of modern democratic institutions.
ing and elevating graciousness of what is enacted in and by the Word who became incarnate into human vulnerability.

My argument for this will proceed by tracking the significance of our human vulnerabilities along two trajectories. Along one trajectory lies the important, but highly contested status that our human vulnerabilities and the contingencies that bear upon them have within the social imaginary of modernity. The immanent frame has brought the contingencies that bear upon our enfleshed human vulnerability into a focus as a fundamental condition of our humanity. Yet a disenchanted world leaves our vulnerabilities bereft of any protection from the impingements of contingency, save those we can devise on the basis of our instrumental reason. As a result, our enfleshed vulnerability is fiercely contested in multiple ways, particularly with respect to its bearing upon our self-understanding as human and upon the relationships we have to one another amid the world’s contingencies.

Along the second trajectory I will be tracking an understanding of liturgy as the locus for God’s abundant empowering enactment of grace, in and upon our human vulnerabilities and the contingencies impinging upon them. This gracing sustains a community of abiding welcome that is constituted in the Spirit by the now-risen crucified Lord Jesus, who entered incarnate into human vulnerability. Accordingly, liturgy may be understood as a shared practice that affirms, celebrates, and expresses God’s initiative of “being with us” as fully incarnate in the contingencies of enfleshed human vulnerability and continuing to abide with us as empowering Spirit.

These two trajectories will then converge at the end in terms of an account of the transformative seeing of our vulnerabilities that liturgy empowers as the space of mutual welcoming that is enacted in and through the vulnerability of the incarnate Jesus as the Pascal Mystery of divine love.

2. Vulnerability as Obstacle: The Immanent Frame and the Eclipse of Grace

The trajectory that the immanent frame imparts to its construal of human vulnerability—i.e., as an obstacle to be eliminated—arises as part of the dynamics of its naturalist veto upon anything other than what we can account for in terms of inner worldly explication and validation. In the process of “disenchantment” characteristic of modernity, the language and forms of scientific conceptualization displaced modes of explanation appealing to forces working within the world
from a sphere of reality different from the empirically accessible.\(^4\) This "naturalist veto" also involves the erosion and loss of any semantics of intrinsic meaning indexing the nature, operation, and place of things to inner finalities that give the world its order. The naturalism of the immanent frame thus stands far removed from the pre-modern naturalism of an Aristotelian world in which a "nature" may be correctly and aptly described in terms of the finalities, both internal and external, that express the principle giving order to its activity. For the immanent frame finality has become otiose as a language of explanation, save for some residual usefulness it may have as shorthand for ends and purposes that agents intentionally adopt.

One major consequence of the naturalist veto that the immanent frame places upon our construal of inner worldly interaction (including the exercise of our own human agency) is that it provides a context for the intelligibility and plausibility of reductive accounts of the human and humanity's relation to the cosmos. In such accounts, reference to the transcendent or to grace, or to an order in which spirit may be conceptualized as a constitutive element of the human, plays no part. The immanent frame - particularly at its most stringent - thereby provides little conceptual, grammatical, or imaginative space for articulating a discourse of the spiritual with respect to our own human identity; neither does it provide space for a graced ordering of the world that exceeds the "natural" and expresses the enacted worldly presence of God - let alone for a discourse of such grace instantiated as sacramentum, i.e., as "visible sign of the hidden reality of salvation."\(^5\)

George Steiner has cogently expressed the momentous importance that this change in the construal of the natural has had for the formative dynamics of modernity: "It is this break of the covenant between word and world which constitutes one of the very few genuine revolutions of spirit in Western history, and which defines modernity itself."\(^6\) Steiner's remark is also fraught with implications for construing the role and importance that liturgical and sacramental practice has with respect to the social imaginary of the immanent frame: Inasmuch as liturgy's inner dynamic rests upon the very covenant of meaning between word and world that modernity has breached, it can play a key role in constituting possibilities for renewing this covenant in and for the immanent frame. This role, I will be arguing in the next section, is constituted by how and what liturgy enables us to see inscribed in the human vulnerability in which we stand with one another before the contingencies of the world. Liturgy provides us with a capacity for seeing our vulnerability in its

\(^4\) This often functions within what Taylor calls "subtraction stories" in which religion declines in direct relation to developments in scientific understanding; see A Secular Age, 25–28, 31–41.

\(^5\) Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 774.

receptivity for the enactment of a graced Paschal transformation upon us. In that transformation our vulnerability is moved along a trajectory in which it now becomes a locus of welcome into communion with God and with one another. Liturgy reminds us how our vulnerabilities inherently point us to the human solidarity and interdependence that has been taken up and transformed salvifically in the incarnate enactment of God's Word into the contingencies of the world. How liturgy does so by enacting these transformative possibilities as the space in which grace may be discerned in the immanent frame will be then be the focus of the fourth section.

3. Vulnerability as Invitation: Liturgy and the Enactment of the Discourse of Grace

The larger account that Taylor provides of the emergence of the this-worldly social imaginary of the immanent frame seems to exclude any meaningful placement of transcendence, or of human relation to the transcendent, within a culture of secularity. It might thus appear that an effort to render intelligible to such a culture the language and the workings of grace as they function in the contexts of sacramental and liturgical activity should be secondary to the larger project of making credible an affirmation of divine transcendence and of spirit as a constitutive element of the human. Liturgical and sacramental practices are deeply interwoven into the fabric of Christian belief. As a result, it might appear that attentiveness to the 'gracing' they enact is a function of already standing with the ambit of the community's prior encounter with God's self-revelation, as both transcendent and immanent – a fundamental point that the immanent frame contests. Since liturgical and sacramental language and practice function in a frame of reference that already stands counter to the naturalistic closure of the immanent frame, it might seem an unlikely place from which to launch an effort to render a discourse of grace intelligible for the naturalistic social imaginary of the immanent frame.

I am suggesting otherwise. We need not wait upon a more encompassing response to the challenge the immanent frame poses to affirming the transcendence of the self-revealing God confessed by Christian faith in order to render intelligible the grace that is enacted and encountered in sacramental and liturgical practice. I am proposing, instead, that liturgy, as the locus of the Church's transformative enactment of the life-giving signification of grace, can itself play a key role in marking out spaces of meaning from which the discourse of grace and transcendence may effectively speak to the cultures of secularity. This is so be-
cause liturgy transforms the meaning of the spaces of our human vulnerability within the same dynamics of contingency that, for the immanent frame, loom as an unavoidable and sometimes dreaded marker of the fragility of our human condition. In that transformation, what had been spaces of dread become, in view of liturgical and sacramental enactment, spaces of divine and human welcome and communion.

Liturgy invites us to enact a transformative understanding of what it is to be human, one that enables us to see our vulnerabilities exhibiting a depth to our human mutuality that the immanent frame’s atomist and voluntarist account of human identity and relationality renders almost invisible. Liturgy allows us to see this depth insofar as it invites us to acknowledge our vulnerability as the locus of the Incarnate God’s Paschal enactment of what Taylor calls the “first mystery”: “God’s initiative […] to enter, in full vulnerability, the heart of the [human] resistance [to God], to be among humans, offering participation in the divine life.”

Liturgy is thus the locus for acknowledging that the “being with us” in which the Incarnate Word has taken on the full measure of human vulnerability even unto death now empowers us to stand with the Crucified and Risen One in communion and solidarity with one another.

Locating liturgy with respect to its fundamental bearing upon our human vulnerability thus opens possibilities for a transformative engagement with the immanent frame inasmuch as that same vulnerability, as it is deeply inscribed in our human condition, has become, particularly in late modernity, an unavoidable yet destabilizing vector in determining the moral orientation of the immanent frame. At issue is the meaning and significance of the human in the face of the contingencies that manifest, often enough in devastating and deeply destructive ways, how fully we are immersed in vulnerability. The naturalism of the immanent frame, moreover, has raised the ante for what is at stake for us in our vulnerability. From its perspective there is (and was) no God to hold accountable either for our vulnerabilities or for the contingencies that impinge upon them. As Susan Neiman has noted, in an account of the disenchantment of the natural that resonates with Taylor’s, the human vulnerabilities that become manifest in a world in which the inner workings of nature are devoid of purpose and stand indifferent, at best, to human well being now mark a major point of moral fracture within and for the intellectual culture of modernity.

Her trope for this fracture between the disenchanted natural world of all that is and our moral aspirations to make it into the world it ought to be is compelling:

7 Taylor, A Secular Age, 654.
8 “If the events that determined the twentieth century left contemporary experience fractured, any conception of reason that can be salvaged must reflect fracture itself,” Susan Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought: An Alternative History of Philosophy (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002), 327.
"Homeless." She remarks, "The gap between nature and freedom, is and ought, conditions all human existence [...] Integrity requires affirming the dissonance and conflict at the heart of experience. It means recognizing that we are never, metaphysically, at home in the world." This fracture is all the more challenging when it becomes apparent that we are all too often no better than nature in our indifference to these vulnerabilities and their consequences. Having first disen­chartered the workings of the world of nature into indifference to human purposes, we have proved ourselves no better at providing for one another a small space of respite in which to attend to the wounds and the scars that ensue from the work­ings of contingency upon our vulnerabilities.

In the context of the central role that instrumental reason has been accorded by the immanent frame for shaping our response to the contingencies of the world, exercising control over the world emerges as a core strategy for protecting our vulnerabilities against the ravages of things gone wrong in the spaces of worldly contingency. Yet, as both Taylor and Neiman point out, much of the testimony of the human history that has unfolded in the wake of increasing hu­man instrumental capacity to direct and alter the working of the world to human purposes seems to belie the promise of overcoming the contingencies that heed­lessly impinge upon our vulnerabilities. Our efforts to ward off such impingement all too often bring in their wake further impingements – and those latter may be of at least as much consequence as the ones we originally hoped to ward off.

Articulating both an adequate moral understanding of and an appropriate re­sponse to these vulnerabilities within the disenchanted context of modernity thus marks out a crucial field of contention over the fundamental shape and signifi­cance of human experience and engagement with the world and its contingencies as it has emerged in modernity. On this field, it should thus not be surprising that one major line of combat has formed around the salient in which the dis-

---

9 Ibid., 80.

10 Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought, 236–237, aptly notes with respect to the consequences that follow for our self-understanding of our own humanity from a disenchantment that renders the world indifferent to human aspirations: "Science may have abolished the sense that the world is inhabited by forces with wills of their own, and in this way reduced the unheimlich. But the price is enormous, for all of nature stands condemned. Human beings themselves become walking indictments of creation."

11 Cf. Neiman, Evil in Modern Thought, 73–75. With respect to the workings of contingency, she poignantly observes on p. 74 that, "Small dreams are no surer to become true than great ones, and either can become nightmare in the blink of an eye."

12 Taylor sees this as a "three, perhaps ultimately, four-cornered battle" within which there are a variety of ad hoc alliances that can form among the three major contenders for the legacy of modernity (or its remnants) that Taylor identifies: neo-Nietzscheans, acknowledgers of transcendence, and variously configured defenders of secular humanism. See Charles Tay­lor, "A Catholic Modernity?" in Dilemmas and Connections (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univer­sity Press, 2011), 180.
course of ‘rights’ has been put in place as the primary bulwark of protection against threats to basic human vulnerabilities. Taylor considers the articulation of the discourse of rights to be one of the major moral achievements of modernity; yet he also argues that the secular discourse of rights, particularly when its protective function is framed through a procedural syntax that avoids substantive claims about what constitutes the human, has too often proved a clumsy instrument for protecting our most fundamental human vulnerabilities as they are affected both by the contingencies of the workings of nature and the vagaries of human intentionality and action.

The contingencies of the world that most strikingly manifest our vulnerabilities – such as severe life-time physical disabilities or affective incapacities, in large and small dislocations of people in consequence of war, civil unrest, economic instability, or natural disaster – often do so in ways that stretch to and beyond the limits of the capacity of the chief moral sources that the immanent frame recognizes, justice and benevolence, to move us to respond in timely, appropriate, and effective ways to those affected by them. Taylor notes the ironic consequences that have followed in the wake of modernity’s construal of these moral sources as the “hypergoods” that trump all others in efforts to fend off the ravages of contingency. However noble the ideals these hypergoods have inspired, they have also had enormous power to distort, dominate and crush: “The Kharkov famine and the Killing Fields were perpetrated by atheists in an attempt to realize the most lofty ideals of human perfection.” Taylor’s account echoes Foucault’s insight into “the ways in which high ethical and spiritual ideas are often interwoven with exclusions and relations of domination.” In the absence of the recognition that we are linked in mutuality through our shared human condition of vulnerability, benevolence and compassion, as Nietzsche and Dostoyevsky both recognized, all too readily become masks for a contemptuous pity.

13 “In public debates standards that are unprecedentedly stringent are put forward in respect of these norms and are not openly challenged. We are meant to be concerned for the life and well being of all humans on the face of the earth … we subscribe to universal declarations of rights … But it is a quite different thing to be moved by a strong sense that human beings are eminently worth helping or treating with justice, a sense of their dignity or value,” Charles Taylor, Sources of the Self (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 515.

14 “Is the naturalist affirmation [of benevolence] conditional on a vision of human nature in the fullness of its health and strength? Does it move us to extend our help to the irremediably broken, such as the mentally handicapped, those dying without dignity, fetuses with genetic defects?” Taylor, Sources of the Self, 517.

15 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 63: “Hypergoods” are “goods that are not only incomparably more important than others but provide the standpoint from which these must be weighed, judged and decided about.”

16 Ibid., 518–519.

17 Ibid., 518.
4. Liturgy: Grace as Transformative Seeing

The criticism that Taylor offers of the crushing power of lofty ideals resonates with some of the bleaker postmodern accounts of our human moral circumstances. It stands here, however, as an important coordinate for this essay's constructive proposal that liturgy can play a significant role in rendering the discourse of grace intelligible for a culture shaped by the immanent frame, particularly by helping to enlarge its capacity to engage our human vulnerability not simply as an obstacle to be overcome but rather as a fundamental marker of a mutuality that calls us to solidarity with one another. He suggests that what is needed to move beyond the dilemma that hypergoods pose to the naturalism of the immanent frame is not resignation to the conclusion "that the highest spiritual aspirations must lead to mutilation or destruction" (or, as he puts it more concretely, that we have to choose "between various kinds of spiritual lobotomy and self-inflicted wounds"). What is needed instead is a transformative seeing that alters how we see and value our human condition of vulnerability as it is embedded in the fractured interplay of contingency: "[A] transformation of our stance towards the world whereby our vision of it is changed." On Taylor's account there is a "double-sidedness" to such a transformative seeing: Both the one seeing and what is seen are mutually implicated in the transformation effected in the "seeing." Acknowledgment of the possibility of such mutual transformation, he argues, is not peculiarly modern. This genealogical point is of particular significance for my argument in that the lineage of this modern dynamic of transformation can be traced back to earlier understandings of the working of grace: "In fact, the notion of a transformation of our stance towards the world whereby our vision of it is changed has traditionally been connected with the notion of grace." In the case of our vulnerabilities, how does the transformative seeing that liturgy provides alter our understanding of our human condition of vulnerability? More specifically, how would the transformative seeing that discerns them as a primary locus of grace within the space of the contingencies of the world – which, I am proposing, is the transformative seeing that liturgy enables for us – thus bring about a self-transformation through which we could now respond to them in appropriate ways? My proposal here is that such a transformative seeing is one that empowers us to see our vulnerabilities in a way that the naturalism of the immanent frame all too often blocks: To see them as the good that they are in the sight of God's graciousness. This is to see them as the locus of the enactment of a transformative good effected liturgically and sacramentally in them and through

---

19 Ibid., 449.
20 Ibid.
them by the Word who became incarnate into human vulnerability so that our human vulnerability becomes the very locus of the Paschal mystery that thoroughly redeems the entirety of creation.

To the extent that liturgy provides a frame of reference for a transformed engagement with human vulnerability, it constitutes an open space from which to begin an effort to render a discourse of grace intelligible for a culture of secularity at a point fraught with particular significance for the immanent frame. Secular culture—or at least significant parts of it—has had to grapple with the reality and significance of our human vulnerability to the full array of the world’s contingencies, including those we bring upon ourselves—yet it finds no clear space for seeing it as good. This same vulnerability is a central feature of our human reality that the enactment of the liturgy and the workings of the sacramental order present to us as the space for the workings of God’s graciousness.

In sacrament and liturgy we are empowered to see our vulnerabilities as good in that they become the locus of communion with God and with one another. These vulnerabilities are the locus of the Paschal mystery enacted in Jesus; they are nothing less than the locus in which we encounter God’s most profound gracing of ourselves and from which we are invited to enact this gracing for one another. Liturgy as the Church’s enactment of the mystery of God’s transcendent graciousness thus makes that transformative graciousness present by drawing us deeper into the human vulnerability that the now-risen Crucified One shares with all of us. In drawing our vulnerability into the life-giving Paschal enactment at the center of the liturgy, we encounter God’s graciousness as transformative of our capacities for a mutual entrusting of our vulnerabilities into one another’s hearts and hands. This scope of this transformation is such that Bruce Morrill can aptly remark that “The scandal of the cross has passed over into the scandal of the Church, that is, into the stupefying claim that in such ordinary, limited, and sinful people as ourselves God is revealing God’s unbounded love, mercy, and forgiveness for the world.” 21 Liturgy thus enacts a community transformed by God’s graciousness into a space of abiding welcome into which we may bring any and all of the vulnerabilities that have been inscribed into our lives.

A key element in this construal of liturgy is that it takes the human vulnerability we share with one another and that the crucified and risen Jesus Christ has taken upon himself to be an appropriate lens through which we may discern the liturgical enactment of grace in its power to form and sustain a community of welcome. Through this lens we are empowered to see our human vulnerability as good. Through the enacted vulnerability of the incarnate Jesus as the Pascal Mystery of divine love our human vulnerability becomes the locus in which we en-

counter God's gracing, in and from which we are invited to grace one another. I have already indicated that, to the extent that the immanent frame seems unavoidably drawn to attend to the challenges that our vulnerability presents to our self-understanding and to the scope of our responsibility to one another, our vulnerability may provide an especially rich locus for articulating a discourse of grace in and for a culture of secularity. Liturgical practice that enables seeing and engaging our vulnerabilities as the locus in which the good and grace of salvation is encountered and in which we stand in welcome to one another may enable a secular culture to notice, perhaps to its surprise, that the graciousness of God's transcendence has already entered and is at work even in the immanent frame.

5. Coda: Vulnerability and a Renewed “Seeing” of Transcendence

Let me conclude this discussion by elaborating further on one dimension of human vulnerability that makes it an appropriate, but nonetheless challenging, locus for which liturgy, in enacting and sustaining a community of welcome in the midst of our vulnerabilities, may serve as a context from which to render the discourse of grace intelligible within the immanent frame. This dimension is coordinated to the self-involving transformative seeing noted earlier that provides the structure of what Taylor calls the “languages of personal resonance” and that he construes as an enactment of grace. This indicates that one significant way that liturgy can help to make grace intelligible in a secular age: It enables us to (re)-construe transcendence, as encountered as the mystery of God’s graciousness in the liturgical activity of the church, in the light of what Taylor describes as the distinctive tonality that the immanent frame of modernity gives to the grammar of “self transformation” as it is articulated in these languages of personal resonance.

22 It is important in this context to understand two dimensions of “self-transformation.” In the first instance it is a transformation in which the self is an object of transformation: it is the self that is transformed, whatever the agency of that transformation may be. In the second instance, the self participates in its own transformation; it is this second instance that modernity has highlighted, but, as Taylor points out, this does not necessitate (as some influential modern accounts of the self would have it) that the self is the sole agent of its own transformation. Grace is an invitation to human cooperation.

indexes these languages to their function in enabling a self-involving transformative seeing of good: They articulate "the search for moral sources outside the subject through languages that resonate within him or her, the grasping of an order which is inseparably indexed to a personal vision."24 He sees such languages providing a specific marker of a new dimension of the human spirit emergent in modernity, viz., they effect an imaginative transformation of our own possibilities for "seeing good" in ourselves that then transforms all that we see as good.

Taylor's point here thus suggests how the transformative seeing of our vulnerability that liturgy enables – i.e., seeing it as a locus inviting us to a deeper engagement in human mutuality and solidarity – also enables us to "see" transcendence differently. Such a transformed "seeing" of transcendence opens a possibility for subverting and destabilizing the account of transcendence standardly proposed from within the immanent frame, in which transcendence stands in overwhelmingly threatening otherness to the fragility of our finite human condition. Liturgy, as has been noted above, enables us to see our vulnerability as the locus of the saving enactment of the Paschal mystery, rather than as the field on which we encounter the capricious randomness of the contingencies of an indifferent nature or the overbearing otherness of transcendence; it does so precisely in view of the community's profession that the One who is transcendence became incarnate in human vulnerability and now enables us in the Spirit to welcome one another in all our particular vulnerabilities. Liturgy may thus be taken to enact a self-involving transformative seeing that effects a communal counterpart to what Taylor describes as the function of languages of personal resonance.

On Taylor's account the mode of the transformative activity of languages of personal resonance has its deepest roots in a dynamic of grace. Languages of personal resonance provide, moreover, a creative variation, set in a register that is at once imaginative and conceptual, of a central theme in the immanent frame's construal of our self-identity: The responsibility we each have for the shape we give to our actions and the direction we give to our lives, of which one highly influential form was articulated in Kant's concept of autonomy. Even as Taylor emphasizes the distinctively modern tonality of such "languages of personal resonance" as coming from within, he acknowledges that their power as transformative does not come simply from within oneself. The creative tonality of these languages has its origin in a transposition, historically set in motion by Herder, of the creative activity of God's Word to the constructive activity of human words.25 Taylor thus considers it appropriate to articulate their transformative power in

24 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 510
terms of the Creation language of Genesis, in which God’s seeing and bringing forth of good is one and the same: “On a Christian view, sanctification involves our sharing to some degree God’s love (agape) for the world, and this transforms how we see things and what else we long for or think important.” He contends that this transformative power is, in a fundamental way, a gift beyond ourselves: It is not a Pelegian moral boot-strapping that effects this new “seeing.” He elaborates how this insight from John’s gospel can be expressed in a modern tonality stemming from Dostoevsky, who, brings together here a central idea of the Christian tradition, especially evident in the Gospel of John, that people are transformed through being loved by God, a love that they mediate to one another, on the one hand, with the modern notion of a subject who can help to bring on transfiguration through the stance he takes to himself and the world, on the other.27

Understood within the context of transformative seeing, liturgy becomes the locus in which we are invited to participate in the transformation which Jesus manifests, as Incarnate Logos. The Word Incarnate manifests how the “seeing good” effected in Creation is completed in a “seeing good” that, entering fully into human brokenness in all its historical particularity and remaining abidingly mindful of that brokenness, becomes a pattern for our enacting transformative healing for one another as a community in the Spirit. Participating in this transformation, moreover, enables us to attend to divine transcendence not only as made manifest in the magnificence of liturgical enactment, but – perhaps of greater importance for engaging a culture of secularity – as manifest in the humility and graciousness of the simple invitation of “take and eat ... take and drink” that gathers us around the Eucharistic table. In this regard, an observation from David Power is pertinent:

To grasp the significance of the exchange in bread and wine, one may need to draw attention not simply to the plenty of a table but to what the bread and the wine offer by way of glimpsing human vulnerability and brokenness; for here precisely is where the Word and Spirit enter our lives, affecting in a particular way the vulnerability of human life today in the face of multiple global forces.28

26 Taylor, Sources of the Self, 70.
27 Ibid, 452.
28 David N. Power, OMI, “Eucharistic Justice,” in Theological Studies 67 (2006): 864. He offers a more general articulation of the principle at work in Worship, Culture and Theology (Washington: The Pastoral Press, 1990), 249: “The sacramental meaning inherent in Christian liturgy is not something added on to the nature of human experience. It is drawn out of this; it gives an orientation to the sacramental potentiality which is one with corporeal nature and the human person’s presence in the world as an integral part of it.”
This finally brings me to the further purpose this coda serves: To gesture in a direction that suggests that there is something amiss with the line of criticism that some have offered in regard to post-Vatican II liturgical renewal and reform, i.e., that it has resulted in a diminishment or even a loss of a “sense of transcendence” that makes us aware of the majesty and glory of God and of our creaturely dependence. 29 I suggest, instead, that to the extent that that liturgical renewal and reform has helped to make us more attentive to the fully human mode of vulnerability in which the Word incarnate effected the salvation of the world, it has deepened and enriched our sense of transcendence. While it is surely the case that solemn liturgical celebrations with flawlessly performed music and executed with careful attention to all the ritual prescriptions can provide a tantalizing foretaste of what it is like to stand in awe in the heavenly court of the Lord of Hosts,30 the transcendence of God has been made present in our midst not just by mighty trumpet blasts, the shaking of the earth, or fire from heaven. There is also the divine transcendence that Elijah recognized in the gentle breeze, that is enacted in the cup of water given in the Lord’s name, and that is made present when as few as two our three gather around the Eucharistic table, or when the oil of anointing graces the hands and forehead of the infirm. This is the transcendence of divine compassion, divine transcendence made manifest in the breathtaking humility of the Word become incarnate into the full vulnerability of our human condition and made present to us in the humble ministry we offer to one another as the church.31

29 An instance of such criticism may be found in an address by Auxiliary Bishop James Conley of Denver (April, 2011) who remarks: “And yet I think many of us would agree with [Evelyn] Waugh on this point: Something has been lost. Something of the beauty and grandeur of the liturgy. Something of the reverence, the mystery, the sense of the transcendental. This has been a persistent criticism since the Council — and not only from so-called traditionalists” (http://www.zenit.org/en/articles/bishop-conley-on-the-new-translation; accessed 22 January 2015).

30 Sancrosanctum Concilium 8, “In the earthly liturgy we take part in a foretaste of that heavenly liturgy which is celebrated in the holy city of Jerusalem toward which we journey as pilgrims, where Christ is sitting at the right hand of God, a minister of the holies and of the true tabernacle ...”

31 Cf. Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate 14: “‘Worship’ itself, Eucharistic communion, includes the reality both of being loved and of loving others in turn. A Eucharist which does not pass over into the concrete practice of love is intrinsically fragmented”; Catechism 1397: “The Eucharist commits us to the poor. To receive in truth the Body and Blood of Christ given up for us, we must recognize Christ in the poorest, his brethren: ‘You have tasted the Blood of the Lord, yet you do not recognize your brother ... You dishonor this table when you do not judge worthy of sharing your food someone judged worthy to take part in this meal ... God freed you from all your sins and invited you here, but you have not become more merciful’” (St. John Chrysostom, Hom. in 1 Cor. 27, 4: PG 61, 229–230).