

Joseph Martos. *Honest Rituals, Honest Sacraments: Letting Go of Doctrines and Celebrating What's Real*. Eugene, OR: Resource Publications, 2017. xix, 156 pp. \$20.00 Paperback. ISBN: 9781532640452.

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Joseph Martos brings together his original academic work in philosophy with his many years of teaching and writing on sacraments. This book aims to make the academic arguments in his recent *Deconstructing Sacramental Theology and Reconstructing Catholic Ritual* (Wipf and Stock, 2015) available to a more general audience. He adopts what he calls a persuasive rhetoric that makes the insights of his academic work more reader-friendly for the “average Catholic.” To that end, he eschews the use of footnotes, offering instead the recommendation to go to *Deconstructing* for the proof.

Martos’s introduction offers snapshots of various contemporary experiences of sacramental life. He notes an emerging picture of experiences that do not make religious sense or that show a form of ritual dishonesty. The root of this problem, Martos says, is the attempt of the Roman Catholic Church to be contemporary yet still cling to medieval ideas (xvii). This assertion sets up the central argument he wishes to advance: formulations of sacramental theology that are derived from scholastic theology, which continue to govern magisterial sacramental theology and rites, are an impasse for the hunger for honest sacraments in today’s Church.

To persuade his readers, Martos proposes a nontheological reading of symbols and rituals, which is addressed in chapters one and two. Martos argues that symbols and words have no meaning in themselves. Rather, he says, “understanding or meaning is not in the words or symbols but in our mind” (15). He develops an important frame he names “spiritual realities” that are known through feeling, like values and relationships. Like words, they may arise out of experience, but there are those that are real yet “cannot be experienced directly” (15). Chapter two moves from a discussion of words to metaphors. Through multiple biblical examples, Martos shows how lively metaphors can die, suffocated by metaphysical thinking.

Chapters three and four delve into the questions and problems raised by the metaphysical frameworks of scholastic theology. Even the scholastics’ adoption of Aristotelian categories intended for the natural world needed adaptation to fit the demands of faith and supernatural change. Martos sees in particular how the category of causality has permeated, perhaps overpowered, sacramental practice with a temptation to magical thinking—a cause and effect relationship (81). He notes how the context of scholastic sacramental theology is not our context today; the continuation of its analysis no longer holds true.

Chapters five and six are Martos’s endeavor to advance new frameworks for thinking about sacramental practice. These frames are honest rituals and honest sacraments. Martos defines an “honest” ritual as one in which the reality being celebrated is present when the ritual is being performed. He sees a progressive disconnect of sacramental practice from the experience of members of the church today. He calls for “honest sacraments,” “those that

celebrate not beliefs but those that celebrate lived realities—spiritual realities” (109). He calls for a ritualization of “Christian values and gospel principles” (116), highlighting as central the value and principle of agapê, which he sums up in its root meaning as mutual care. For him, honest sacraments do not celebrate beliefs but lived experiences. He takes up each of the seven sacraments to explore possibilities for more honest practice. With the lens of agapê, he offers an ethical dimension to contemporary sacramental practice.

I found myself agreeing many times with Martos’s basic claims—the importance of the connection of sacraments to daily life and the ethics of mutual care, for example, which also have ecumenical possibilities. Realizing his audience, I could excuse the quick historical narratives and broad assertions. What I did miss is a more robust account of sacramentality and a fuller account of liturgy since Vatican II, with attention, for example, to the way the *praenotanda* of the rites offer a wider glimpse of how sacramental action relates to human and ecclesial relationships. A further discussion of the complexity of meanings in ritual and a reader-friendly account of praxis-based ritual theories would deepen his insights. All trouble seems placed at the feet of a particular scholastic theology. One cannot simply take “medieval scholastic theology” as monolithic. I wanted to see a perspective that allows for the deconstruction of the system that allows some retrieval. I ended wanting more of a both/and rather than an either/or.