Ritual, Symbol, and Experience: Understanding Catholic Worker House Masses

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“Ritual, Symbol, and Experience: Understanding Catholic Worker House Masses”
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ABSTRACT

This article uses house masses in a Catholic Worker community to examine the interaction of symbols and experience in religious rituals. It argues that, during the period of this study, these weekly masses served to reinforce Worker identity by guiding participants' experiences along specific lines. Ritual symbolism and the moment-to-moment attention of the participants combined to move participants from despair at the state of the world to an experience of a community of solidarity and hope. A second phase of the ritual then expanded that community to include homeless people, by means of a symbolic second 'mass' of soup, bread, and water, delivered in the streets. The article demonstrates the need for sociology to consider the experiential dimension, along with the symbolic, in understanding rituals' role in religious life.

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Several years ago, I published an article on Navajo ceremonies that challenged the then prevailing system of 'reading' rituals (Spickard 1991). At the time, such readings focused primarily on symbols and sought to decode the meaning of ritual events using one or another interpretive scheme. I argued that such approaches are fruitful, but limited. They miss important aspects of ritual, specifically the fact that rituals occur in time and impress themselves on time-bound experience. That is, rituals are like music: polythetic rather than monothetic. They cannot be captured or summarized by any system.
of symbols, though our understanding of rituals can be enhanced by symbolic interpretation.

My article used the social phenomenology of Alfred Schutz (1951) to explore the structure of ritual experience. I found a parallel between the Navajo sense that ritual reconstitutes the world and Schutz’s emphasis on the shared sociality of certain types of co-experiencing. Seen as a "life-world," ritual is not just a system of ideas or a set of institutional relationships, though it partakes of both. It is also a system for structuring time—a structuring that those co-present to the ritual share. Balancing the truth that experience cannot be separated from ideas with the truth that experiences cannot be reduced to them, I showed how Navajo ceremonies embody Navajo theology by recreating cosmic harmony, not just symbolically but in the time-structured experiences of ritual participants.

I had hoped to follow this article with a similar analysis of Christian ritual, showing how a Schutzian analysis of this better-known religion leads us beyond the symbolic realm, though without losing the richness that symbolic analysis brings. That task proved daunting, at least in part because Christianity is much more idea-oriented than is traditional Navajo religion. Where Navajo theology reflects (and follows) ritual life, Christian ritual seems subordinate to theology, at least for Christian intellectuals. The road past symbolism has here proved harder to travel.

In the meantime, my article has come in for a bit of constructive criticism. In a very worthwhile piece, David Yamane (2000) takes me to task on two grounds. First, he argues that my reconstruction of Navajo ritual fails because I provide "not a single word from any Navajo who had actually experienced any ritual." Second, he argues that experiencing is inherently private, "and therefore cannot be directly studied." One can, he says, only study articulations of experience—that is, the transformation of experiences into words. In his view, Schutz’s (1951) description of musical performance—on which my description of the co-experienced sociality of ritual was based—is vacuous. Schutz’s notion of a polythetic sharing of consciousness based on the common experience of structured time does not provide a parallel sociality to the sociality of ideas. Like the turtles standing on turtles that supported the classical Hindu cosmos, it seems that Yamane views experience as ideas all the way down.2

Both these criticisms involve a denial of the phenomenological project. The first criticism denies that one can describe the objective structure of experience; the second denies that experience can be social in and of itself, alongside the (clearly social) words with which that experience is apprehended. In Yamane’s vision, events are only graspable through narratives: retrospective symbolically rendered accounts that translate the private into the public realm. Though he is certainly right about events being so graspable, it is his "only" that gives me pause. Philosophically, it seems to me presumptuous to dismiss Husserl, Heidegger, and the rest of the phenomenologists with a flick of the hand. Empirically, there seems to me to be sufficient evidence for shared time-structures independent of shared meaning-structures; to limit 'experience' to only the

latter seems presumptuous as well.

I further note that Yamane's approach relies on a core principle of European folk philosophy, the separation of words from things. Westerners generally think that things exist independently of people and that words are tools with which to represent them. Traditional Navajo thought gives humans a much greater role in creating the world, especially through thought and language. As Gary Witherspoon (1983:575) writes,

Navajos do not postulate the possibility that language may distort reality or the perception of reality.... On the contrary, reality was created or transformed as a manifestation of language. In the Navajo view of the world, language is not a mirror of reality; reality is a mirror of language.

It seems again a bit presumptuous to suppose that the Navajo are wrong about this and that Westerners are right. My approach to ritual parallels Navajo thought in emphasizing the connection between language and experience rather than their separation. Though one must always pay attention to narratives, it is at least as important to examine the flow of time that contains them. The ways that rituals structure such flow is a clue to their operation. So are the narratives by which our informants tell us how they experience them.

Mere theoretical riposte does not, however, advance the field. I think it is now possible to show the value of my previous work by applying it to a Christian ritual. Taking the weekly house masses at the Los Angeles Catholic Worker commune as my subject, I shall show how the analysis of symbols and time-structures complement each other, together producing a rounded picture of religious ritual. Unlike my previous article, however, I shall not overtly depend on Schutzian phenomenology. Instead, I shall take a clue from Navajo philosophy itself. I previously showed how Navajo rituals are designed to recreate a unitary world in the experiences of their participants. In the present article, I shall show how, during my fieldwork, the experience of house masses helped Catholic Workers reconstitute a sense of themselves as a committed egalitarian activist community.

Navajo rituals are justly called healing rituals, because they move the world back toward the harmony that traditional Navajos believe it had at its creation (Csordas 2000). The Catholic Worker ritual that I describe below is not so bold, but it does serve to reinforce a sense of the rightness of the religious path that Workers have chosen.

My interaction with the Los Angeles Catholic Worker community began in 1991 as part of a study of religious social activists, continued for many years as a field trip venue for students in my university courses (on homelessness and the sociology of religion), and since 2001 has been part of my personal calling. A Quaker, not a Catholic, I am now something of a fellow traveler in this community. Both insider and outsider, ethnographer and participant, I journey along the rim of Worker life (Flynn 1989).
THE LOS ANGELES CATHOLIC WORKER

The Catholic Worker movement is well known. Founded in New York the 1930s by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin as a Catholic response to the Depression, the movement combines a relatively orthodox Catholic theology with pacifism, communal living, service to the poor, and a radical orientation to social justice. Groups of Workers live together, dedicating their lives to poverty, social action, and a life (to use the words of one of the Los Angeles group's members) "of which Jesus would approve." Theirs is not the worldly kingdom, to which most Workers think that the Church as a whole has sunk. They live the peaceable kingdom in the here-and-now, in solidarity with "our friends on the streets." To quote another member of the Los Angeles commune, "We feed the hungry, nurse the sick, clothe the naked, bring hope to the hopeless. Above all, we try to love them."

Through a loose network of "houses of hospitality" in dozens of cities nation-wide, Catholic Workers aid homeless people, neither as missionaries nor rescuers, but as friends and witnesses to their plight. The Los Angeles commune runs a soup kitchen, a free clinic, passes out blankets and clothing, and invites some homeless people to live in their large, rambling house in one of L.A.'s poorest neighborhoods. They have run an AIDS hospice for those with nowhere else to turn. With other activists, they secured port-a-potties for the homeless by staging a sit-in at the Los Angeles City Hall that blocked the entrance to the men's rest-room. (Creative direct action is a hallmark of their work.)

Along this line, Workers routinely protest war by picketing the Los Angeles Federal Building and by trespassing at various nuclear and missile test sites. They occupied the tower of the about-to-be-demolished St. Vibiana's Cathedral, protesting the archbishop's decision to build an extravagant new structure instead of spending more on the poor (Dietrich 1996). Visitors are frequently introduced by their arrest records: 'So-and-so spent six months in jail for protesting the School of the Americas and was arrested in a Plowshares action.' Such acts are not taken lightly, but the Workers believe that Jesus-and 'Saint Dorothy'-would approve.

Actually, Dorothy Day might not (Roberts 1984; Coles 1987), though she did famously say, "All of our problems stem from our acceptance of this filthy, stinking, rotten system." Yet, the movement has changed a bit over the years. As one member of the Los Angeles community put it:

Dorothy used to say that she would shut down her operation

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3 Among the many books on the Catholic Worker movement, I have found Piehl (1982), Roberts (1984), Murray (1990), and Zwick and Zwick (2005) to be the most useful. Coles (1987) and Thom, Runkel, and Mountin (2001) discuss the specific contribution of Dorothy Day to the movement, while Aronica (1987) reminds us that Day was just a part of that movement, not the whole of it. Ellis (1978) and Flynn (1989) provide personal descriptions of Worker life and mission. Troester (1993) collects reflections and reminiscences of many current and former group members. On the Los Angeles Catholic Worker specifically, see Dietrich (1983, 1993) and Flynn (1989).
the moment the Archbishop told her to. If the Archbishop here wanted us to shut down, we'd invite him to talk about it at our favorite Mexican restaurant—and he should bring his credit card.

Following in Day's tradition, the L.A. Workers publish *The Catholic Agitator*, a monthly 8-page broadsheet of religious reflection on contemporary social issues. An excellent example of radical Catholicism, the *Agitator* recently proclaimed the Worker mission with these words:

We feed the hungry, clothe the naked, comfort the afflicted, afflict the comfortable, and speak truth to power not because we think that the world will suddenly be converted to peace and compassion, but because we will die (spiritually) if we do not practice what we believe. (*Catholic Agitator* 12/2001)

A quotation from Mohandas Gandhi on the door of the soup kitchen refrigerator declares that "Anyone who thinks that religion is not political understands neither religion nor politics." This aptly sums up Catholic Worker philosophy.

**Overview**

About six-thirty each Wednesday evening, Workers and their friends gather at their communal house in East Los Angeles to celebrate a eucharist or quasi-eucharist. If there is a priest available, he leads the mass; if not, a member of the community, male or female, serves as celebrant. After a longish service, the group of 15 to 30 shares a potluck supper. Then several Workers take huge pots of soup into Los Angeles's "Skid Row" area to share with the homeless. They pass out soup, bread, and water to as many as 250 residents of the street and of the few SRO hotels that remain after L.A.'s urban renewal.

In the following pages, I describe the Wednesday evening mass as it was practiced through the end of 2002. Since then, a shift in the community's spiritual life has subtly but significantly reshaped that event. See the "Methodological Postscript" at the end of this article.
Two hundred and fifty may not seem like a lot, given the Weingart Center's (2004) estimate that there are some 80,000 people homeless in Los Angeles County on any given night. But this includes people in shelters, temporary housing, and so on—not just those living on the streets. More appear at the soup line toward the end of the month, when public assistance checks have run out, but, in reality, the event that most predicts the number of street homeless is police sweeps. Police harassment of the homeless is both sporadic and widespread. At any rate, there are always plenty to eat the Worker's food.

**Structure**

In structure, these masses generally follow the Catholic norm. After opening prayers and a song there are two or three readings, usually from Scripture but occasionally from other sources (more often when a female community member is leading). The celebrant then reflects on these readings, but—unlike most Catholic services—his or her 'homily' lasts at most a minute or two and is followed by a period of silence into which anyone may speak. These being Catholics rather than Quakers, there is much more speaking than silence; the 'group homily' often lasts twenty minutes or more, with many comments about problems in society and with the political and Church establishments. Though not uniformly dark, and by no means hopeless, their content reinforces the Workers' sense of being part of a small, faithful remnant in a world that has lost touch with God's will.

This group homily often shows a balance between comments framed as 'questions' and comments framed as 'answers.' For example, an October 2001 evening's readings were from newspaper accounts of families' reflections on losing relatives in a plane crash. This was followed by an attender's reflection on losing his wife during the Gulf War, wondering about the relationship between personal and social tragedy. The next speaker described delivering babies that morning, and how one always has to balance death with new life. Others echoed these themes, enriching them with stories and grieving for those they had lost.

Times of social crisis seem to give people more to say: the comments during the 1992 Los Angeles riots were particularly lengthy, as were those in the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September, 2001. They are seldom shallow. Symbolically and actually, such a group homily reinforces the Workers' egalitarian views.

The typical service then proceeds with more songs and prayers, including a call for prayer requests from the attenders. These are also given plenty of time, ranging from personal prayers to prayers for "our friends on the street," for "all those in prison," for specific

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6 When First Lady Barbara Bush visited Los Angeles's "Skid Row" in the early 1990s, for example, police moved out nearly 80% of the area's usual inhabitants so that she would not see how bad the homeless problem really was.
prisoners of conscience and for the softening of national and Church leaders' hearts.

Then comes a call for "the passing of peace." Though an ordinary Catholic service would see people shake hands with their neighbors or at most give a short hug and the words "Peace be with you," the Worker service halts completely, to give each person in the room a chance to hug everyone else. Everyone stands, and the celebrant leaves the head table and joins the milling throng of huggers and huggees, as each wishes "peace" to all. This takes at least ten minutes. When all are have returned to their seats, the eucharistic or neo-eucharistic portion of the service starts.

This part of the service follows two patterns: a standard Catholic liturgy done by priests or by male members of the Worker community, and a more diverse style that women celebrants bring.

Priests, of course, follow the standard liturgy, though with home-baked bread rather than wafers for the Host. Seated behind a table rather than standing, they bless the bread and wine, then pass them around the room, so each communicant takes her or his own portion without priestly mediation. Especially recently, portions of the blessing are said by all, reinforcing the rather un-Catholic notion of the priesthood of all believers. Quiet music encourages reflection, and the period usually ends with a song.

Female celebrants often get more creative. Not only are readings more eclectic, as previously noted, but the residual hierarchy between celebrant and congregate is practically erased. Specifically, women often give attenders even greater ritual roles. One asked each participant to take a flower from the bouquet on the ceremonial table. Another asked people to feed bread and wine to each other. A third opened time for personal testimonies of celebration. The results are still recognizably Catholic, but even more non-hierarchical. This is not surprising for a group that sees itself as a prophetic remnant within a priestly Church—and sees such priestliness as a fall from God's intent.

The ceremony is not yet over. At this point, one of the Workers brings out a large pot of soup, which he sets on the celebration table. Celebrant and attendees hold out their hands in blessing, while an attendee (never the celebrant) intones a ritual blessing modeled on the blessing of the Host. The soup is removed, a few announcements are made, and the room is reconfigured for a potluck supper at which the soup plays a key part. Among those announcements is always a call for "Who's doing soup?"—that is, who is taking soup, bread, and water to the streets. There are usually lots of volunteers.

**Soup**

After supper, eight to ten Workers and friends climb into an aged van for the short drive to the Catholic Worker soup kitchen—known as "the hippie kitchen" to the residents of L.A.'s Skid Row. There they pick up two huge pots of soup, plus bread, water, bowls, spoons, cups, hot sauce, salt, and pepper. They drive to a distribution point on one of the nearby streets, past the rows of cardboard condominiums that dot the area, to where a line of homeless people has already formed. The Workers set up their wares in the parking lane on overturned milk crates. Anyone can have soup, bread,
and water. People can go through the line as many times as they
want until it is gone. There are no required prayers or "nose dives"
(Spradley 1970), no required thanks, not even a requirement that
eaters be homeless. I have seen drug dealers, prostitutes, and busi-
nessmen take a bowl and chat with both Workers and homeless
people. The meal is completely free, no strings attached, given with
face-to-face humanity, one person to another.

Of course, Skid Row is not exactly the gentlest place on earth,
particularly at the end of the month (when people are more needy)
or at the height of the crack epidemic. Several of the Workers are
good at crowd control, especially one gray-haired former nun who
is renowned for breaking up fights. But there are not many of these
at the Wednesday night soup line; I, in fact, have never seen one in
thirteen years of visits. Even on the night of the 1992 Los Angeles
riots, though the atmosphere was tense, it was not dangerous. Af-
ter all, the homeless and the Catholic Workers are neighbors, and
one does not hurt a long-term neighbor who brings much-needed
food to one's 'dwelling' (the street). My middle-class students, who
had previously checked the locks on their cars when driving through
the area, find themselves relaxing and bantering with street resi-
dents. Some have described the experience as life changing.

When the soup is gone, Workers return to their Skid Row kitch-
en, clean up, and go back home. The evening is over-typically, three
to three-and-a-half hours after it began.

SYMBOLS

Like all rituals, this one is full of symbols. In the interests of space, I
shall leave aside those found in every Catholic mass, such as the
symbolic elevation of the Host, the symbolism of bread and wine,
and so on. (Catholic Workers, like most Catholics and unlike many
Protestants, consciously highlight this symbolism.)

There are several points, however, at which Worker ritual sym-
bolizes the difference that Workers feel between themselves and
the Church at large. The first of these is obvious, but not often
openly marked: Wednesday evening masses take place in the Cath-
olic Worker house, not in a church, and the celebrant is either a
member of the community or is a priest specifically invited to lead
the service. That is, the Worker community provides the frame of
reference for the service, to which the Church-at-large is at best a
visitor. Workers and their friends gather to celebrate together, not
in opposition to the Church but neither in bondage to it. They see
themselves as carrying out the mission that God set for the faithful,
and often pray that the institutional Church will see the error of its
ways.

Specific points in the service that assign tasks traditionally done
by the priests to everyone present highlight this sense of the prima-
cy of the community of believers. The first of these is the joint hom-
ily. In a 'normal' Catholic service, interpreting scripture is the
priest's prerogative; Catholic Workers allow every-one's voice to be
heard. This symbolically puts attenders and celebrants on the same level—a quite radical notion for traditional Catholicism. The similar openness to prayer requests is partly a function of the small size of the group, but symbolically emphasizes the role of the congregation and de-emphasizes that of the priest or celebrant. So do the long "Peace be with you" hugs.

More significant, however, is the joint recitation of parts of the eucharistic blessing—an aspect of Wednesday masses even more common in recent years than before. Having congregants jointly deliver parts of the blessing specifically asks them to play a priestly role. If it takes 'a priest' to say these words, then congregants become 'the priest' collectively. Jointly blessing the soup follows the same symbolism—especially because a member of the congregation says the blessing, not the celebrant. The celebrant participates on exactly equal terms with the 'lay' people—as one member of a collective priesthood.

7 This does not mean that the Catholic Worker community is as theologically eclectic as, say, the Quakers. Joint homilies sometimes hover around what amounts to a 'party line'—the limited range of theological and political interpretations found in other Worker writings. Symbolically speaking, however, shared homilies emphasize the intellectual importance of each member of the community, regardless of the relative unity of views that in fact prevails. Catholic Charismatic groups are also often open to individual prayer requests, and for similar symbolic reasons. These are, however, more tightly controlled than Worker requests, rarely straying from personal calls for converting relatives and friends in need. See Neitz (1987)

This is not the end, however, because "doing soup" carries the most interesting symbolism of all. Seen as part of the liturgy rather than as an after-hours addendum, "doing soup" transforms the entire service into a symbolic double mass. In a traditional mass, the priest blesses the bread and wine, eats and drinks, then distributes the ritual meal to the multitudes. The first mass roughly follows this pattern, though with the weakened role-divide between celebrant and congregants just mentioned. The second mass begins with the congregants' communal blessing of the soup—a priestly act, which is highly marked in the evening ritual. After this blessing, all present eat it as part of the potluck supper. Then members of the community (as 'priests') take it out to the streets and distribute it to all comers.

Not having been raised Catholic, it took me some time to notice the dual nature of this ritual. No Workers had remarked on it in my hearing, and I had been told that serving soup in the streets began as a temporary measure, when the original "hippie kitchen" was destroyed in the 1987 Whittier earthquake. When I noticed, I was at first unsure whether the symbolism was conscious. Some direct questioning told me that it is, at least for the core participants; one even described it to me as "priest duty." Most Workers see serving soup as a sacred as well as a charitable act. How better to bless the poor than to give them 'mass'- in the form of nourishing food? In this light, it makes sense that rich and poor are both welcome at the soup line, that there are no restrictions or requirements, even of prayers, and that Workers see themselves as equals to those to whom they provide food and drink. Worker theology
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roughly follows the theology of liberation, in which Christ is believed to have come for everyone, but especially for the poor. In Worker theology, Jesus does not ask after one’s reputation in the world, nor does he call his followers to solve people’s problems effectively. Instead, he asks that his followers love other people and devote their efforts to helping them. Soup and water are his body and blood, which—given with love—feed the multitudes.

It is helpful here to remember the general Catholic belief in transubstantiation: the real presence of Christ in the sacrament. For many Catholics, the mass is not just symbolic. It involves the physical incorporation of God. One consumes the Divine Presence, which helps suffuse one’s life with holiness and gives one a greater ability to carry out God’s work in the world. The Catholic Worker double ritual not only imbues Workers with God’s charism, but also passes it—through soup, bread, and water—to homeless street people. They, too, become God’s instruments, affirming life and peace in a situation too often dominated by their opposites. (The relative peacefulness of the Wednesday night soup line is thus expected, not a surprise.)

Anthony Stevens-Arroyo notes that similar practices were common in early Christianity. In the early church, he writes,

The practice of breaking the host at the conclusion of the mass for distribution to those unable to attend the ritual was connected to a sharing of free-will offerings to be given to those in need. Thus, in addition to the carrying of the consecrated bread to others, non-consecrated food was shared.

(Personal letter, 11/9/04)

Gradually, the Church dropped the public distribution of consecrated bread in favor of the secular distribution of charity. The sacramental blessing of soup thus restores a literal holiness to this charity that the recent Church has foregone.

EXPERIENCE

I have, in the last several paragraphs, exposed at least part of the ‘meaning’ of Catholic Worker house masses by explaining their symbolism. These masses express Worker egalitarianism, their belief in the priesthood of all the faithful, and their unity with the poor. They express the notion that God is present in the lives of the people. They affirm that God can alter those lives by direct action, using the faithful as hands and feet. These reinforce core Worker beliefs and lend great meaning to the Wednesday evening services.

Such symbolism does not, however, encompass everything that we can say about such rites. Symbols are monothetic: i.e., they are concepts that can be grasped all at once. The ideas that I have just listed are so graspable: they are thoughts that shape our sense of the universe and orient our actions. Rituals, however, are more than thoughts; they are polythetic. Like music, they can be fully taken in only by experience, by living one’s way through them. Just as one does not exhaust the ‘meaning’ of a Beethoven sonata by naming its musical references, its chord structure, its orchestration, and the mental associations that it generates, so one does not ex-
haust a ritual by interpreting its symbols. Living through it, experiencing it unfolding in time does something more than just orienting one's intellect toward a particular view of the world (Schutz 1951; Spickard 1991).

There are several levels to this experiencing, of which I wish here to focus on two: the role of attention in experiencing rituals and the role of this experience in renewing a sense of purpose to one's life as a social activist.

Attention

In his well-known exploration of the psychological experience that he calls "flow," Mihalyi Czikszentmihalyi (1975, 1991, 1997; see Neitz and Spickard 1990) argues that this special state most often occurs when there is an exact balance between a person's skills and the activity that she or he is pursuing. Mountain climbers, chess champions, and dancers, among others, can pour themselves fully into their activities when they have enough skill to avoid anxiety, but not so much skill that their minds wander. At this peak point, he argues, the discursive ego shrinks or vanishes. One no longer experiences life through the veil of a chattering, self-conscious 'I.' When one is anxious or bored, that 'I' stands between oneself and the world, saying either "I can't do this" or "It would be more interesting to be somewhere else." Properly challenged and focused, one is drawn out of oneself, able to pay full attention to one's surroundings. As one of Czikszentmihalyi's rock-climber interviewees remarked, "One tends to get immersed in what is going on around him, in the rock, in the moves... -so involved he might lose consciousness of his own identity and melt into the rock" (Czikszentmihalyi 1975:43).

There is a physiological aspect to such "flow" experiences. Susan Blackmore (1986; 1988) notes that the human brain constructs 'experience' actively, not passively. She argues that the extremely focused attention found in deep meditation (among other places) involves the development of brain states in which the 'I' is simply not part of the brain's model of reality. Out-of-body experiences, lucid dreams, and other altered states of consciousness also construct the 'I' differently; they are similarly experienced as real because the brain is not forced to use all of its input to construct a realistic image of what is going on. Thus, one's brain can perfectly well locate its 'I' outside of the body or, in meditation, nowhere at all.

If the 'I' disappears with such extreme forms of attention, it makes sense that more typical religious rituals can at least demand enough attention to provide a different self-experience than does ordinary waking consciousness (Spickard 2004). Given the proper balance between familiarity and tedium, one might expect a lessened inner dialogue, a different focus on externals, perhaps even a different sense of one's personal boundaries. And this is precisely what I have found in my visits to the Catholic Worker community—for me, for my Worker informants, and for those that I have brought with me (and subsequently inter-viewed about their reactions).

Over the years that I have attended these Wednesday evening services, I have brought along several score of visitors. Often stu-
dents, sometimes colleagues and friends, these visitors have run the gamut from the religiously illiterate to the intensely Catholic, and from the moderately conservative to the politically left wing. As might be expected, they have had varied reactions to the evening ritual, on both religious and political grounds. The most interesting, for present purposes, have been the reactions of experienced Catholics who are open to Worker politics, but who are not familiar with Worker-style participatory Catholicism. Some two dozen of them have shared their reactions with me in some detail.

Almost invariably, these visitors have felt drawn into the Worker ritual. The form is familiar and they know the lines, both those that they are used to saying and those usually said by the priest that the Workers assign to the congregants. That is, they are not anxious, but neither are they bored: Worker house masses are unpredictable enough and call for enough participation to make rote recital unlikely.

A majority of these visitors have reported to me precisely the diminution of internal chitchat that Czikszentmihalyi predicts. Though by no means experiencing full-blown "flow," they report finding themselves unusually focused, carried by the ritual to an inner state beyond what they ordinarily experience in church. Specifically, they report feeling themselves to be part of a collective, centered on those co-present, but extending into the wider world. Through the ritual, but particularly through its participatory transformations, they report feeling themselves "more Catholic" than usual, more open to new theological insights, and more connected to "God's mission," however they may interpret this. And they are clear that it is not just the Worker ideas that have done this, but also their experience of these ideas in ritual. That is, Wednesday evening mass works for them on the level of feeling as well as on the level of symbolism. Its effectiveness also depends on their being able to attend to it in a way does not always happen in their home parishes.

Experienced meditators have also responded in an interesting way. As Blackmore indicates, meditators are used to focusing their attention to experience altered states of consciousness. Though not always familiar with Catholic ritual, these visitors have reported a particular attraction to three parts of the 'first' (in-house) mass: the group homily, the group prayer requests (including the group hug following immediately after), and the passing of bread and wine. Though the last is meditative in any Catholic context, the first two also elicit the kind of heightened attention at which meditators are skilled. Here are the words of a Quaker visitor:

I found the group homily both familiar and strange. We Quakers are used to listening deeply to one another and to speaking from silence. These Catholics don't leave much silence, but their words seem to come from a very deep place. I felt myself following along with complete attention, but also felt that we were doing this together, not separately. Each of us had a part of what needed to be said, and if we listened carefully and spoke when needed, it would all come out.

The same visitor reported that his state of attention continued through the rest of the service, lessening only when the room was
rearranged for potluck. Later on, he spoke of a similar sense in the soup line.

This wasn't the same kind of state—what I supposed the Catholics would call a state of prayer. But there was a centeredness to it, a distinct feeling that we were all in this together: us, the street people, everyone. It's hard to specify, because it was beyond thought. But the feeling was very strong.

Clearly, a more-focused-than-usual attention figured in this visitor's experience. Though not universal, such reports recurred often enough to force me to conclude that the actual experience of the ritual was as important as its symbolic messages. Not that they could be separated; instead, they complemented each other, each contributing to the ritual as a whole.

**Experience and Renewal**

My previous study of Navajo religion showed how ritual performance recreates the Navajo world. Focusing particularly on the Blessingway, I showed how ritual participants, led by a Singer, reenact the story of world-creation in such a way as to set the actual world right again. Navajo theology tells us that the world was created by thought and speech (personified as Long-life Boy and Happiness Girl), and was originally perfect. Over time, that perfection has gradually decayed.\(^8\) Rituals restore the world to its original state—and not just symbolically. They do so by thought and speech, the same techniques by which it was created in the first place. Performed over several days, ritual thought and speech again create a perfect world, this time in the inner experience of the participants. (As healing rituals, they also restore their patients to health—or at least to harmony (hózhó), which traditional Navajo regard as much the same thing.)

In Austin's (1962) terms, such language is performative: it creates rather than describing. For the Navajo, ritual thought and speech accomplish exactly the same thing that thought and speech accomplished at the Creation: they shape the world. Healing occurs because such shaping restores an original wholeness that has been lost. This restoration is an experiential, not a conceptual act; that is, it depends on the action of language in time. Just as reciting a piece of poetry creates an imaginative world unapproached by a statement of what the poem 'is about,' so Navajo ritual works polythetically, not monothetically. Its full power emerges in the acts of speaking and hearing—i.e., in experience. One cannot substitute a summary of that experience for the experience itself, as a summary lacks performative power. Thus, Navajo ritual does more than remind participants of their beliefs; it restores the world that corresponds to those beliefs from the chaos into which it has fallen.\(^9\)

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\(^8\) in fact, traditional Navajo religion claims that there have been several worlds, each created perfect but each eventually descending into chaos and evil. At the end of each world, a few people are guided to a new world, where the cycle of decay begins again. See the several articles on various aspects of Navajo religion in Ortiz (1983).

\(^9\) Though I lack space to elaborate this point further, an important corol-
Given that the Catholic Workers are not Navajos, how is Navajo theology relevant to the Wednesday evening mass described above? Two main connections stand out.

First, both Catholic and Navajo theology share a belief in ritual effectiveness. For Catholics, as for Navajos, ritual speech actually makes changes in the world. In Catholic theology, the best-known change is in the mass itself: ritual language creates the real body and blood of Christ in the sacramental bread and wine. Eating that bread and wine (or soup and water) connects one to the Body of Christ. Specifically, Catholics formally believe that it actually restores that connection, enabling one to do God's work in the world. In this view, the ritual importance of Wednesday evening mass is that it actually transforms the communicants, both those in the Worker house and those in the street.

Yet, Navajo theology also leads us beyond the level of belief, by telling us to take seriously the structure of a ritual's experience, not just the structure of its symbolism. What do we find if we track Wednesday evening mass as an experience, to which its participants devote at least some degree of the heightened attention that I outlined above?

Imagine attending the service as a member or friend of the Worker community, supportive of the group's religious and political aims. Like most masses, the ritual begins with prayers and readings that recall to one the Catholic tradition and especially its social teachings. One listens to the familiar words and ideas, each with an undertone emphasizing the Worker's social mission. Were the mass less participatory, one might daydream (one often does in church). But here one cannot just sit back and observe, for the Worker service demands a more active role. This is especially true of the group homily. There, one listens with increased attention, seeking whether and when to speak; as a result, one registers the words more deeply than one otherwise might. And those words form a pattern.

Both here and in the prayer requests, most Wednesday evening masses describe a world gone wrong. Wars bring death to the world's masses; the rich triumph and the poor suffer; Church leaders support the political and social Establishment, forgetting that Jesus was an outcast who brought hope to prostitutes, criminals, 

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I have based the description that follows on my own observations, on my interviews (formal and informal) with members of the Catholic Worker community, and on my conversations with several dozen of the people whom I have brought as visitors. Like all phenomenological descriptions, it distills the essence of the participants' experiences. My interview method was not as formally realized as is now recommended by Giorgi and Giorgi (2003) for "scientific descriptive phenomenological psychology," but it did follow roughly the same plan.
and the poor. One hears of misplaced priorities, of suffering innocents, of good deeds firmly punished.

But one does not just hear of these things conceptually, as a mass of information. The unfolding of the group homily, its personalism and its focusing of attention lead one to one experience this world in the same way that one experiences a world when listening to poetry. Words embedded in time draw one in. Given the content of a typical Worker group homily, one focuses on a world out-of-joint, a world in which the innocent suffer great wrongs, a world that imprisons the righteous along with the guilty, in which wealth too often stands above the law. This is not an evil world, for that is not the Worker message. But it is definitely a world that needs repair. Both homily and prayer requests follow this vein—a vein that draws participants into a dark space. Not hopeless, but not yet hearing of hope, the mass to this point is a downward movement.

The next step in this shift is the mass itself. First comes the familiar blessing of the bread and wine, undertaken (in part) not just by the celebrant but by everyone. The ritual words tell a story of sacrifice and nurturance. Hearing them with attention reminds one that one is not alone, that Jesus sacrificed himself to save the world from just those social ills of which one has been so recently reminded. Coming just after the reinforcement of the sense of community, this connects one with the group, as does having the community play (in part) the role of priest. Each Worker is reminded of the collective mission. For Catholic Workers—as for Catholics in general—redemption is communal, not individual. The story of the mass is the story of a community relying on God for sustenance, which becomes (through God’s strength) able to carry forth God’s work in the world.

Let me pause for a moment to trace the parallel with the Navajo Blessingway. That ritual likewise tells a story that is modeled in action. The mass imitates Jesus’ Last Supper, as Blessingway imitates Long-Life Boy and Laughing Girl’s creation of a harmonious universe. In each case, the participants identify themselves with characters in the story: Catholic Workers with the Disciples and Navajo with the
universe that is being talked into being. That is to say, both rituals work in the same way, symbolically.

But both rituals also have structure and rhythm, that guide their participants from one point in the story to the next, and that identify participants with the story's characters more than symbolically. Each also takes the form of a series of steps in time, each step of which focuses the participants' attention on one or another element. Neither ritual can be grasped all at once; instead each consists of 'This, then this, then this... '-a series of stepwise associations that lead participants forward on the sensory, emotional, and cognitive levels. The ritual experience is structured on all those levels. Blessingway restores health by restoring the universe to its original harmonious state, in exactly the way that this was done at the world's beginning. The Catholic Worker mass restores the relationship between God and the community by leading participants through sorrow, depression, and doubt to a reminder that there are others who also seek peace in the world, to a connection with a greater force that is also working for good in the universe. Entered into with attention, this mass channels one's senses, emotions, and thoughts toward a renewed sense of hope. That hope is both communal and priestly, welcoming the entire Worker community to become the body of Christ in a world needing redemption.

Then, of course, things really get interesting. The first mass ends, attenders bless the communal soup, eat it, and get ready to take it out into the streets. Where parishioners disperse after an ordinary mass, each returning to his or her own home and private life, some of the participants band together for ritual public service. Eight or ten Workers and friends crowd into a run-down van, laughing and joking, enjoying each other's company and the moment. Compared to earlier in the evening, few comments focus on politics or social problems, and those that do are expressed in a lighthearted vein. Personal conversations focus on what people are doing with their lives, on meaningfulness, on what they have rather than on what they lack. In short, the experience is as 'up' as the group homily was 'down.'

On arriving at the "hippie kitchen," Workers collect the soup and its accoutrements, load them into the van, then either ride or walk to the distribution site. Here, again, they laugh and joke with street residents, many of whom are as thankful for someone to talk with as they are for the soup they bring. My students often find these interactions the most memorable of the evening. They are not generally surprised by the humanity of the street people; instead, they more often express surprise at their own humanity in responding to them. "I never knew I'd laugh so much with a homeless person," one recent student visitor reported to her classmates. "I thought I'd be too scared."

Scared they are not, at least in part because the in-house part of the ritual has given them an experience of moving from negativity and despair to a sense of community and hope. The street portion of the ritual continues this, giving them an experience of being a part of a wider community-the street community that the Workers also call home. As one of the Workers put it to me, "Our helping hand works because we're not rich tourists; we live here. We're just as dependent on donations as are the street people, and we're just
as much a part of the community." The street portion of the Wednesday evening mass carries the community feeling that the house mass generates into one of Los Angeles's worst areas.

Participants experience themselves as being part of something larger, set in a framework of hope. If the street portion of the ritual came first, participants would almost certainly emerge discouraged about the possibility of doing anything to help the homeless. Experiencing (in the first mass) a sense of the community overcoming despair sets one up to experience the street 'mass' as a hopeful and positive act.

Soup served and cleaned up, the mood becomes inward as the Workers pile into the van to return home. There is usually much less talking, as if people need more space from one another—and not just because of the hour, which is not really very late. Students invariably report needing time to think over what has happened; meditators occasionally report finding themselves in a state similar to a very light trance. In neither case does analytic thought dominate. Instead, visitors recall scenes from the evening, replaying them in their memories, feeling again the feelings that the ritual has aroused. Unlike the other church visits on which I have taken students over the years, I have never yet had a student react negatively to this event. I am convinced that the ritual experience has a great deal to do with this result.

CONCLUSION

At the beginning of this article, I noted that the social-scientific analysis of ritual has long emphasized ritual symbolism, usually to the exclusion of other matters. It has, in effect, treated religious rituals as enacted ideas; the fact that those ideas unfold in time and are thus simultaneously thought and experienced has apparently escaped attention. Though there is nothing wrong with such symbolic analysis, it is only one facet of a larger picture.

In this article, I have tried to show how the Navajo notion that ritual actively recreates the world encourages us to see rituals' experiential structure as part of their effectiveness. Catholic Worker house masses clearly embody symbolism, but that symbolism does not exhaust their meaningfulness. Such rituals are poly-, not monothetic. The fact that the Worker double mass structured its participants' attention in specific ways was central to its impact. The 'meaning' of a religious ritual is thus not only cognitive, but also experiential. A close attention to that experience-alongside the analysis of symbols-can tell us much about the rituals and about the communities that perform them.

I am now ready to answer Yamane's (2000) double criticism of my previous article. He first argued that my phenomenological analysis of Navajo ceremonies failed to present any Navajo accounts of their own rituals. He then privileged such accounts, arguing (epistemologically) that experience-inherently private-can be studied only through the narratives by which individuals describe what happens to them. This limits social-scientific analysis to precisely the ideational-symbolic realm from which I had tried to free it. It enshrines hermeneutics as the only field method worth pursuing.
Clearly, the fieldwork reported here does not suffer from the first criticism. Inevitably, it involved much talk with many ritual participants over many years. I have absorbed their narratives rather thoroughly, and indeed have used them to inform my interpretations. Unlike hermeneutic interviews, however, ethnographic conversations are two-way. Not only did I try to understand my how group members saw things. As I both observed and experienced the patterns of shifting attention that typify Worker rituals, I checked my observations and experiences against those of others. I learned that my personal experiences were not unique nor, indeed, were they particularly private. Nor were the personal experiences of the participants whom I interviewed. As both Schutzian phenomenology and Navajo theology suggest, ritual involves the co-experiencing of structured time. It guides individual attention along common pathways, leading (at least in the Navajo and Catholic Worker cases) to the creation of community. The details and indeed the theological intent of Navajo and Catholic rituals may differ. But both guide their participants toward an experienced recreation of the world. Both move from private sorrows to communal solidarity.

Yamane’s error—not his alone—is to think that the inevitable sociality of ideas (including both narratives and cognitive symbolism) trumps all other socialities. Rituals are deeper than this, weaving both ideas and experiences into a nearly seamless whole. Rituals do not just guide our thoughts; they guide our moment-to-moment attention. Perhaps we need to take traditional Navajo philosophy seriously in its claim that ritual reshapes the world-in our experiencing.

A METHODOLOGICAL POSTSCRIPT

I have focused the foregoing analysis on the Catholic Worker masses as they were practiced from the early 1990s to late 2002. I note this for two reasons. First, I wish to avoid the inaccurate timelessness of traditional ethnographic writing, with its false assumption of an unchanging ‘ethnographic present.’ Just as rituals structure time, so, too, do they exist in time; like all time-bound things, they can shift, either subtly or in high degree. No matter how stable, one should never assume that a community’s spiritual life is unvarying. Ethnographers must therefore be careful with their language, so as not to portray their ‘natives’ as leading static lives. (Spickard and Landres 2002).

In point of fact, both my informants and I perceived a shift in the pattern of Wednesday evening masses beginning in late 2002. A long-term community leader returned from a jail sentence with an express desire for more group Bible study and with a seeming need to preach. His influence shifted the group service, though subtly. Homilies are still communal, but more centered on Bible texts than before. Fewer group members now speak, and those who do raise more answers than questions. Ideas seem more important than previously, and are more marked. The blessing of the bread and wine is now significantly less marked when no priest is present. And “doing soup” is now done regularly only by some Workers, not rotated among all.

Yet, much remains the same. The symbolic/experiential transi-
tion from individual to community and from parishioners to priests is still present in the mass. The regular members of the soup crew still see it as a part of their spiritual lives. And the feeling-state in the street is the same, both for me and for my student observers. In my judgment, this ritual still renews Catholic Worker life, though it may now do so in a different way.

Bounding my analysis in time does not change it, but it reminds us that, like all ritual analyses, this one is not once-and-for-all. Logically, one expects that changes in a community's spiritual life will affect its rituals, including participants' experiences of them. This does not, however, undercut the importance of the experiential dimension itself. Just as reflexive ethnographers have had to relocate their analyses in history (Wolf 1982; Clifford and Marcus 1986), so ritual analysts must remember that religion is not static. Full understanding asks us to pay attention both to narratives and to things-as-subjectively-experienced- and to recognize that both can shift.

REFERENCES
_____. 2001. Even after all this... December.


Spickard: “Ritual, Symbol, and Experience”