"The Bread of Life": Sacramental Theology in Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road*

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Inception

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Abstract

Flannery O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away* and Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* are both deeply religious works of fiction that explore the sacramental mystery that lies at the heart of Christianity, especially as characterized by the Eucharist. In this paper, I argue that O'Connor and McCarthy both illuminate the moral and existential implications of the Eucharist through their account of the fundamental human desire for communion with the sacred. For them this communion is necessarily embodied, with the Eucharist as a site of divine enfleshment that invites the participants to experience the fullness of bodily existence.

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The Violent Bear it Away and *The Road* are deeply religious works of fiction that explore the sacramental mystery that lies at the heart of Christianity, especially as characterized by the Eucharist. This principal liturgical practice of the Church is traditionally understood as the transformation of ordinary bread and wine into the divine flesh and blood of Jesus, the consumption of which binds the faith community together into the cohesive body of Christ. The

paradoxical nature of Christ as "the Word made flesh"[1] is represented in this ritual act, as body and spirit, immanence and transcendence are mysteriously linked by the grace of God in the sanctified host. I argue that Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy attempt to draw out the moral and existential implications of sacramental theology—particularly the Eucharist, in narrative form—as both authors conceptualize the human being as primarily desiring communion with the sacred; a desire which is not only intellectual but also is *embodied*. Thus, authentic subjectivity for them requires the self not to search within for reserves of spiritual strength, but to look and act outwardly for physical communion with the divine presence; reaching for a living grace that is the only safeguard against spiritual suffering and death. Conversely, when the self is oriented inwardly, its selfish and narcissistic desires produce grievous effects, as ceaseless want produces a bottomless pit of bodily and spiritual deficit. This theological reading of O'Connor's and McCarthy's novels highlights the way in which both books are centrally concerned with Christianity's articulation of humanity's existential dilemma; namely, how one must live, think and act properly in the midst of a fallen world.

The Synoptic Gospels depict Jesus' celebration of the Last Supper, which was a Passover meal he shared with the apostles before his death on the cross. Luke's Gospel narrates the story as follows:

> Then he took a loaf of bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me.' And he did the same with the cup after supper, saying, 'This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.'[2]

The Eucharist takes its place as a foundational piece of what later comes to be known as sacramental theology because of the writings of early Church Fathers, such as Tertullian, whose biblical

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[1] NRSV, John 1:14: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us."
[2] NRSV, Luke 22:19-20.

translations transformed the Greek *mysterion* into the Latin *sacramentum*.[3] William A. Van Roo notes the wide variety of uses for *mysterion* in early Christian writings, ranging from "the divine plan for man's salvation in Christ, through every stage of its manifestation and realization, to the final consummation."[4] Therefore, *sacramentum* also takes on this array of meanings, as an articulation of the Christocentric soteriological scheme which lies at the heart of Christian theology. The salvific power that Christ extends to his church signified by the term *sacramentum* is embodied in a significant number of beliefs and practices which includes "baptism, the Eucharist, Easter, ordination, anointing, the sign of Christ, the laying on of hands, religious profession, the symbol of faith, Scripture, the Lord's Prayer, feasts, Amen and Alleluia."[5] Augustine provides one of the most influential interpretations of the *sacramentum* in his formulation of the *sacrum signum*: the "sacred sign."[6] With this understanding, as Van Roo comments, "[s]igns which pertain to divine things are called sacraments. A visible sacrifice is the sacrament, that is to say sacred sign, of the invisible sacrifice."[7] Subsequently, the Eucharist functions as a sacred sign of Christ's broken body, the visible bread and wine denoting the divine flesh and blood which are manifested for the sake of the beloved community.

This formulation of the *sacrum signum* proves central to both O'Connor's and McCarthy's explorations of the sacred mystery of the Eucharist in their respective novels. The primary motivation for the characters in *The Violent Bear it Away* and *The Road* is the

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[3] William A. Van Roo, *The Christian Sacrament*, Analecta Gregoriana; Series Facultatis Theologiae, Sectio A, Vol. 262. N. 34 (Roma: Editrice Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1992), 37.

[4] Ibid., 35.

[5] Ibid., 39.

[6] Ibid., 38.

[7] Ibid., 38.

search for sacred signs that may either validate or alleviate the bodily and spiritual suffering which afflicts the protagonists of these narratives. In O'Connor's *The Violent Bear it Away*, Francis Tarwater's journey either to fulfill or to escape the destiny of prophet-hood left to him by his great-uncle Mason hinges upon the deliverance of a divine sign which might confirm this calling. His spiritual struggle during this quest is given corporeal form by a gnawing hunger which eats away at his insides, unsatisfiable by any earthly nourishment. Only through his acceptance of the fact that this hunger is the same as old Tarwater's—who desires above all else the "bread of life" embodied in the divine person of Jesus—is Francis' physical and spiritual malaise banished. Francis has this realization through a visionary experience—a "sacred sign" which is inextricably linked to the symbolism of the Eucharist. O'Connor herself confirms this reading as she writes elsewhere that her novel exists as "a very minor hymn to the Eucharist."[8] While Cormac McCarthy avoids the explicit approval of the traditional Eucharist that inheres in O'Connor's novel, he nonetheless structures his narrative so as to provide space for the redemptive power of grace that finds its most potent expression in the image of communion. Unlike O'Connor, McCarthy does not believe that this grace is handed down from above, but rather exists imminently within the bonds of filial love. This is not to discount the role that immanence plays in O'Connor's work; both she and McCarthy share the keen sense that "goodness," used here in the broadest sense of the word, is only possible when embodied in the world. However, O'Connor and McCarthy diverge in their moral accounts of how the sacraments function. For O'Connor, the Eucharist is a sacred sign of the irresistible divine grace which operates outside of human agency, even as it invests human action with meaning, while in McCarthy, the *sacrum signum* is only ever embodied in the midst of human

[8] Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being: Letters*, ed. Sally Fitzgerald (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1978), 387.

love, as the sole remaining mode of grace possible in a desolate world where the "sacred idiom" has been "shorn of its referents."[9]

The Violent Bear it Away is centrally about the existential fate of Francis Tarwater as the identity of his soul is fought over by the opposing forces of Mason and Rayber Tarwater. Mason Tarwater represents the biblical prophet called out of the world and into the wilderness, represented by his dwelling place at Powderhead, to receive and transmit God's message of divine judgement and retribution for the sins of the world: "He had been called in his early youth and had set out for the city to proclaim the destruction awaiting a world that had abandoned its Saviour."[10] Meanwhile, Rayber signifies the cold detachment of secular rationality as he rejects Mason's openness to the divine call. Although Rayber recognizes that he has Tarwater blood, and is a member of the prophetic lineage to which Mason belongs, he is able to actively suppress this part of himself through rigorous self-discipline and intellectualism.[11] O'Connor writes Francis Tarwater as an amalgam of Mason and Rayber, portrays this in Francis' wish for a kind of prophet-hood that is unsullied by the scandal of Christ's embodiment and suffering. Like Mason, Francis aspires to the exceptional visionary ability of prophet-hood but, unlike Mason and more like Rayber, he denies the association of divinity with fleshly existence. Therefore, Francis desires the elevated status associated with being a prophet, but rejects Mason's Christology of Incarnation: "When the Lord's call

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[9] Cormac McCarthy, *The Road* (New York: Vintage International, 2006), 89.

[10] Flannery O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1960), 5.

[11] "The affliction was in the family. It lay hidden in the line of blood that touched them, flowing from some ancient source, some desert prophet or pole-sitter, until, its power unabated, it appeared in the old man and him and, he surmised, in the boy . . . [Rayber] had kept it from gaining control over him by what amounted to a rigid ascetic discipline." O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 114.

came, he wished it to be a voice from out of a clear and empty sky, the trumpet of the Lord God Almighty, untouched by any fleshly hand or breath."[12] Francis idealizes the divinity represented by the Hebraic God, who is distant, incomprehensible, and wholly Other. He wishes for his prophet-hood to be characterized by the prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures, who do not relate to God through kinship, as Jesus does, but through miracles; unmistakeable signs of a Pure Spirit uncorrupted by fleshly matter.[13]

Francis' struggle between the opposing pulls of Mason and Rayber manifests within him as a raging hunger which is impervious to any earthly meal. Francis appears to be fated to suffer this hunger, as he fears that it has been passed down to him through his great-uncle Mason:

> The boy sensed that this was the heart of his great-uncle's madness, this hunger, and what he was secretly afraid of was that it might be passed down, might be hidden in the blood and might strike some day in him and then he would be torn by hunger like the old man, the bottom split out of his stomach so that nothing would heal or fill it but the bread of life.[14]

This concern of his turns out to be a reality. As O'Connor depicts Francis' journey away from Powderhead, a symbolic flight from the influence of Mason, his gnawing hunger is a constant companion, even as he attempts to assuage it. In one particularly suggestive scene, Francis gluttonously consumes "six buns filled with barbeque" and drinks "three cans of beer," his base, physical will to

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[12] Ibid., 22.

[13] "Had the bush flamed for Moses, the sun stood still for Joshua, the lions turned aside before Daniel only to prophesy the bread of life? Jesus? He felt a terrible disappointment in that conclusion, a dread that it was true." Ibid., 21

[14] Ibid., 21.

eat, consume and digest overpowering him.[15] However, this sinful feast is then promptly vomited into the lake whereupon his perpetual hunger returns: "a ravenous emptiness raged in his stomach as if it had re-established its rightful tenure."[16] This is one of the many instances in the novel where Francis' rebellious will is resisted or repelled by some agency which lies outside of him. In this case, the earthly food he wantonly consumes is expelled from his system by his hunger, which almost appears as a second character at this point: "The food appeared to be sinking like a leaden column inside him and to be pushed back at the same time by the hunger it had intruded upon."[17] This, I argue, is O'Connor's indication that Francis is inextricably caught in God's salvific plan; in the grammar of her narrative, the grace of God operates in ways which confound human agency and will.

The structure of Francis' journey as he escapes from and returns to Powderhead, the site of his great-uncle's death, also represents the inexorable pull of grace that pervades O'Connor's story. The action of *The Violent Bear it Away* begins with Mason's dying wish that Francis give him a Christian burial, his grave marked by the sign of the Cross. He strongly admonishes Francis against cremating his body, as Rayber would want to do, believing this to be a sign of the rejection of Christ's death and resurrection.[18] After his great-uncle dies, Francis begins the task of digging his grave but abandons it, instructing Buford Munson to do it instead. This decision is prompted by a voice that enters his consciousness simply called the "stranger." At the behest of the stranger, Francis goes and gets drunk on

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[15] Ibid., 167.

[16] Ibid., 174.

[17] Ibid., 171.

[18] "'[Rayber would] be willing to pay the undertaker to burn me to be able to scatter my ashes,' [Mason] said. 'He don't believe in the Resurrection. He don't believe in the Last Day. He don't believe in the bread of life . . . '" Ibid., 16.

moonshine, ignoring Buford when he comes to tell him that Mason's body should be preserved and respected until the burial. After Francis awakens he goes to the cabin and burns it, believing his uncle's body to still be inside. Although O'Connor informs the reader from the first sentence that Buford has indeed buried Mason, Francis never learns of this until the final pages of the book when, upon returning to Powderhead and finding his great-uncle's burial site, Buford tells him, "It's owing to me he's resting there. I buried him while you were laid out drunk...It's owing to me the sign of his Saviour is over his head."[19] O'Connor uses Francis' ignorance of what the reader already knows—that Buford has buried Mason according to his wishes—in dramatically ironic fashion, exposing the machinery of grace that extends across her narrative. No matter how far Francis runs from his obligations to his great-uncle, he is caught in a divinely fated set of circumstances; his own purpose of burning Mason's body thwarted by God's intention for Buford Munson to bury him instead.

The climactic point of the novel is Francis' realization that God's grace for him is embodied in the Eucharist; in the very bread of life which he has resented for the entirety of the narrative. O'Connor provides hints throughout the story that Francis unconsciously recognizes that his hunger is linked to the spiritual food of the sacraments. For example, when Rayber follows Francis through the city streets at night, he sees him gazing longingly into a store window, his face looking like "someone starving who sees a meal he can't reach laid out before him."[20] When Rayber goes to see what Francis was looking at, all he sees is "a loaf of bread pushed to the side that must have been overlooked when the shelf was cleaned for the night."[21] Although Rayber is incapable of understanding the

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[19] Ibid., 240.

[20] Ibid., 122.

[21] Ibid., 122. O'Connor distinguishes between the dual sites of Powderhead, where Mason lives, and the city, where Rayber is. The

significance of this moment, O'Connor leads the reader to understand that it is the "bread of life" that Francis sees in the window, although he is not consciously aware of it yet. This dynamic is also at work as Francis consumes the marijuana and whiskey offered to him by the stranger who gives him a ride; what Travis P. Kroeker labels as "the anesthetising anti-sacraments."[22] Francis exclaims of the liquor, "It's better than the Bread of Life!" [23] O'Connor displays the ironic effects of Francis' inner turmoil, his desire for the relief of the sacraments misplaced in the consumption of illicit substances. As the effects of the drugs take hold he feels "pleasantly deprived of responsibility or of the need for any effort to justify his actions." This abdication of responsibility takes an ugly turn as Francis is then molested by the stranger.

In commenting on this scene, O'Connor notes that it is "the intensity of the evil circumstances" that brings the action of divine grace home for Francis; she writes, "I couldn't have brought off the final vision without it."[24] Indeed, what follows this horrific sequence is the visionary experience that Francis receives when he returns to Powderhead; humbled and broken he is prepared for what lies ahead: "He knew that he could not turn back now. He knew that his destiny forced him on to a final revelation."[25] As he approaches

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former location is imbued with enchantment, while the latter is constituted by a spiritual lack: there the sun is "too far away to ignite anything" (28). It is telling, then, that this bread, in the context of the city, has no obvious sacramental status, but is tossed aside and forgotten. As I will argue, McCarthy retains this sense of the Eucharist's forgottenness in the world of *The Road*. However, his novel contains no comparable recourse to the spiritually vibrant location that exists in O'Connor's Powderhead.

[22] Travis P Kroeker, "'Jesus Is the Bread of Life': Johannine Sign and Deed in *The Violent Bear It Away*," from *Dark Faith: New Essays on Flannery O'Connor's* "*The Violent Bear It Away*," ed. Susan Srigley (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2012), 147.

[23] O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away*, 230.

[24] O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 368.

[25] O'Connor, *The Violent Bear It Away,* 233.

Powderhead, his hunger reaches greater intensity: "[i]t appeared to be outside him, surrounding him, almost as it were visible before him."[26] Finally, when he receives word from Buford that Mason had been given a Christian burial, he gazes on the field where his great-uncle is buried and witnesses a vision of the feeding of the five-thousand where Jesus multiplied the loaves and fishes for the hungry crowd. Francis sees his great-uncle there: "[Mason] leaned forward, his face turned toward the basket, impatiently following its progress toward him."[27] Here Francis is given full consciousness of the true object of his hunger: "The boy too leaned forward, aware at last of the object of his hunger, aware that it was the same as the old man's and that nothing on earth would fill him." Francis finally witnesses the *sacrum signum* which he has been searching for the entire novel, his destiny of prophet-hood confirmed in the sacred sign of the miraculous bread and fish.

Although the symbolism of the sacraments pervade both *The Violent Bear it Away* and *The Road*, their significance is understood quite differently by both authors. The moral vision of O'Connor is expressed in terms of an inner struggle of the will; Francis caught between desiring the prophet-hood of Mason, and simultaneously wanting to escape that fate. He acts out the latter desire through his rebellious actions of burning Mason's cabin, excessively consuming food and taking the "anti-sacraments" of weed and liquor. In each of these actions, however, Francis' purposes are always denied by the heteronomous action of grace; an external divine call to realize his true desire for the salvation embodied in the sacraments. McCarthy, on the other hand, is doing something quite different in *The Road*. The "externality" of grace in O'Connor's novel is replaced by an "internal" and inter-subjective model of divine providence. The nameless man of McCarthy's novel only finds respite from his existential crises through intimately relating to his son, a relationship

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[26] Ibid., 239.
[27] Ibid., 241.

which his only source of meaning in the godforsaken post-apocalyptic world of *The Road*. I argue that, although McCarthy adopts the logic of sacramental theology which O'Connor utilizes, he transposes it to a humanist key: there are no transcendent salvific sources in *The Road*, no divinely-given visions—only the immediacy of filial love can provide grace in the world of McCarthy's narrative.

Before looking at how McCarthy utilizes the logic of sacramental theology and the Eucharist to articulate his own moral position, it is first necessary to understand how the cosmology of his novel diverges from that of O'Connor's. In *The Violent Bear it Away*, the natural world functions as a conduit for the sacred, especially in the wilderness as symbolized by Powderhead. Francis' dramatic encounter with the *sacrum signum* seen in the miraculous loaves and fishes is facilitated by returning to this sanctified location; the site of his great-uncle's divinely ordained burial. O'Connor contrasts the prophetic vibrancy of "wilderness" to the spiritual deadness of the city, a location which represents Rayber's disenchanting worldview. Here the sun is "too pale to ignite anything," whereas in Powderhead it resides as a "furious white blister in the sky."[28] By contrast, in *The Road*, the post-apocalyptic landscape is characterized by a total lack of spiritual life; the sun has completely vanished from the world, replaced by an omnipresent horizon of ash. There are no Powderhead's or Mason's in McCarthy's world, as the world has been wiped clean of sacred places and the prophets which inhabit them.

Despite this fact, *The Road* is replete with Christian imagery: allusions to a sacred past which highlight the desacralization of the present and further underscore the pervasive sense of nihilism that faces the father and son of the novel. The environmental degradation of this post-apocalyptic world is characterized by skies continually blotted by ash, a snowfall here looks like "wet gray flakes

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[28] Ibid., 28, 25.

twisting and falling out of nothing."[29] McCarthy juxtaposes this image of natural decay to the vanishing of the sacramental life of the Church from earth: "It's snowing, the boy said. He looked at the sky. A single gray flake sifting down. He caught it in his hand and watched it expire there like the last host of christendom."[30] Unlike O'Connor, who retains Mason's reverence for the bread of life, McCarthy is more pessimistic about the continuing power of the institutional Eucharist. It is telling that this reference to the "last host of christendom," the most explicit allusion to the Eucharist in *The Road*, is framed in terms of finality, decomposition, and death. Also of note is McCarthy's formalistic technique of lower-casing the word "christendom," emphasizing that, as the Constantinian project of Christian empire has failed, so too have its sacramental practices diminished. McCarthy questions this connection between liturgy and empire, wondering whether or not the sacramental life of the Church is founded on earthly rather than divine power.

Other places in the novel contain similar references to the distant history of Christianity's past, in ways which also emphasize the disuse of traditional faith in a present reality which is godless and unholy. For example, McCarthy writes how mummified corpses who had their shoes stolen were "discalced to a man like pilgrims of some common order."[31] This is a reference to the Catholic ascetic orders which practiced going barefoot in order to demonstrate their piety insofar as they followed Christ's example in identifying with the poor. However, McCarthy ironically reframes this pious practice in terms of the theft and death that prevails in the world of *The Road*. The observation of asceticism in the time of the story seems impossible as the holy ideal to which monks and nuns aspired in their everyday life is now erased; as McCarthy writes elsewhere in the novel, the

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[29] McCarthy, *The Road*, 16.
[30] Ibid., 16.
[31] Ibid., 24.

"sacred idiom" has become "shorn of its referents."[32] Given that McCarthy seems to indicate that the sacred past no longer exists as an ideal to strive for, but rather as a discarded relic, it is now necessary to turn to how he reframes the possibility for sanctification and grace in a godforsaken reality.

In his discussion of the role of Eucharist in the fiction of Cormac McCarthy, Matthew Potts argues that there is a dominant strain of sacramental theology that supports the moral vision of McCarthy's novels. Potts finds that in the debate between Catholics and Reformers over the status of the sacramental bread and wine, the common thread between Thomist transubstantiation and Reformation reclamations of the "ordinariness" of the sacred elements is that the act of communion necessarily draws the community of believers into the presence of the suffering Christ. Synthesizing the commonality between these traditions Potts writes,

> Theologies of incarnation and sacrament must look toward the humble and the ordinary, not at the glorious, for God. If the fullness of God is paradoxically revealed in the broken body of the man Jesus, then the fullness of Christ can be revealed in the broken loaf of the gathered community, too.[33]

In this ecumenical demarcation of sacramental theology, the suffering of Christ plays a crucial role. The inbreaking of the holy through the sacred wafer and wine is necessarily mediated through the persecution and execution of Jesus; without this earthly sacrifice there can be no soteriological function of the elements. Although Potts cautions that is not trying to "baptize either Cormac McCarthy or his fiction," he nonetheless claims that "McCarthy exploits the ancient tradition of Christian theology in order to locate the value of

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[32] Ibid., 89.

[33] Matthew Lawrence Potts, "The Frail Agony of Grace: Story, Act, and Sacrament in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2013), 14.

human acts and relations in a 'sacramentally' imminent way."[34] I find that this is a potentially productive way of reading McCarthy's *The Road*; a work which on the surface can often appear blighted by a sense of hopelessness and nihilism. Arguing alongside Potts, I claim that McCarthy does find hope in the sacraments, albeit in ways far more muted than O'Connor and her fiction.

A key element of *The Road's* potential affinity for the theology of the Eucharist lies in the sacralisation of the relationship between the father and son of the novel. McCarthy often describes the son in Christological terms, creating the sense that the father's only recourse to whatever salvation is possible in the blighted world of *The Road* is through relationship with him. In a particularly resonant moment which demonstrates the man's utter dependence on his son for the possibility of hope, McCarthy writes, "He knew only that the child was his warrant. He said: *If he is not the word of God God never spoke*."[35] Although McCarthy strongly suggests the possibility that God never spoke with the conditional "if"—validating the nihilistic interpretation of his novel—he seems to indicate that the man is rather operating "as if" God has indeed spoken his son, his only hope, into existence. The rhetorical force of the double-negative in this sentence points to the father's will to believe. Therefore, if the son truly is the "Word of God;" a reference to the Gospel of John which conceptualizes Jesus as being the very ground of intelligibility for all of creation—the divine Word or *Logos*—then the son of the novel also functions in this metaphysical sense of providing the groundwork of meaning for the man.[36] While McCarthy is no

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[34] Potts, "The Frail Agony of Grace: Story, Act, and Sacrament in the Fiction of Cormac McCarthy," 14.

[35] McCarthy, *The Road*, 5. Emphasis mine.

[36] The mother's despair over the possibility for a future life is characterized by her belief that language has ceased to be of any use: she asks why her and her husband have stopped talking about death and her answer to this rhetorical question is "because it's here. *There's nothing left to talk about*" (56, Emphasis mine). This connection between

metaphysician, as indeed the violent and chaotic setting of the novel seems to preclude any possibility for stable meaning, there is nonetheless a sense that meaning exists in the immediacy of authentic relationship; the first lines of the novel have the father waking into the cold and dark of night and immediately touching his son, this physical touch being his only solid referent for meaning in "nights dark beyond darkness…"[37]

There are other moments in the novel which draw strong parallels between the father's relationship to the son and sacramental imagery. After a harrowing encounter with one of the "bloodcult" cannibals who the man shoots dead, his son is soiled by gore and has understandably suffered massive trauma from this event. Later, as they find shelter for the night, the man washes his son: "This is my child, he said. I wash a dead man's brains out of his hair. That is my job."[38] Next follows a moment of paternal tenderness and affection as the father wraps him in a blanket and dries his hair next to the fire, kicking "holes in the sand for the boy's hips and shoulders where he would sleep."[39] This sequence of fatherly care and intimacy is given ritual significance by the following lines: "All of this like some ancient anointing. So be it. Evoke the forms. Where you've nothing else construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them."[40] The affirmative locution "so be it" recalls the biblical "amen," a sanctification of this strange anointing. Despite the horrific circumstances of the ritual, McCarthy suggests that sacred signs may be plucked from "out of the air," so long as there is living breath

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death and the failure of language is counterposed to the father's belief that his son, as the embodiment of the divine Word, represents the possibility for life: the fundamental hope for future existence that underlies the Christian story.

[37] McCarthy, *The Road*, 3.

[38] Ibid., 74.

[39] Ibid., 74.

[40] Ibid., 74.

to sustain them.[41] Later that night, the father sits while watching the child sleep and regards his son in these strongly suggestive terms: "Golden chalice, good to house a god."[42] This Eucharistic image of the "golden chalice" recalls the splendour of Catholic ceremony, a nod to the extravagant liturgy of the Holy Roman Empire. However, McCarthy ingeniously subverts this image of earthly wealth by the implicit context of the scene; the frail sleeping child, scarcely recovered from the traumatic events of the day prior. In this image of innocent suffering, McCarthy invokes the theological meaning of the sacraments which Potts has outlined: that only in the physical and psychic trauma of the Son is the salvific potential of the Eucharist possible.

Other instances of physical intimacy between the father and son are given sacramental significance by McCarthy. The ritual of baptism is suggested when they find a secluded pool at the base of a waterfall and decide to go swimming. The frailty of his undernourished child shocks the man as they undress: "Ghostly pale and shivering. The boy so thin it stopped his heart."[43] As they enter the freezing water the child asks for words of reassurance from his father: "Is it over my head?" "No. Come on," the father emboldens. The boy stands in the pool "hopping up and down" and the man picks him up: "He held him and floated him about, the boy gasping and chopping at the water. You're doing good, the man said. You're

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[41] The man's invocation to "construct ceremonies out of the air and breathe upon them" is reminiscent of his wife's enigmatic advice from earlier in the novel: "A person who had no one would be well advised to cobble together some passable ghost. *Breathe it into being* and coax it along with words of love" (57, Emphasis mine). McCarthy draws another biblical parallel here with the Genesis account of the creation of Adam: "then the Lord God formed man from the dust of the ground, and *breathed into his nostrils* the breath of life" (NRSV, Genesis 2:7, Emphasis mine).

[42] Ibid., 75.

[43] Ibid., 38.

doing good."[44] These simple moments of interaction during one of the only carefree moments of the novel are written provocatively by McCarthy. Although there is no overt reference to traditional religious iconography, the simple fact of a trusting father-son relationship is given spiritual gravitas, each word and physical gesture implicitly suggesting the sacredness of the moment; the baptismal water sanctified through filial love. Potts suggests that these moments of profound connection, the washing of the hair and the bathing in the pool, "are not signs of life, or not *just* signs of life: these acts themselves bear the fullness of life itself. They do not point beyond themselves to some greater value: they themselves realize that value."[45] While O'Connor proposes that the sacred sign experienced by Francis points to some transcendental, heteronomous source, the *sacrum signum* of McCarthy's novel by contrast is always only the enfleshed relationship of father and son.

I do not mean to suggest from this reading of O'Connor's and McCarthy's novels that their moral visions for the sacraments are totally separate. O'Connor writes in one of her correspondences that "salvation was accomplished when the Spirit was made flesh," and subsequently "[w]hen the Spirit and the flesh are separated in theological thinking, the result is some form of [Manichaeism]."[46] While McCarthy is less enthusiastic about positing any such definitive theological statements,[47] his narrative in *The Road* reflects O'Connor's rejection of Manichaeism, resisting the temptation to

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[44] Ibid., 39.

[45] Potts, "The Frail Agony of Grace," 208.

[46] Flannery O'Connor, *The Habit of Being*, 360.

[47] In an interview with the Wall Street Journal, when asked about his Irish Catholic heritage McCarthy tersely responds, "It wasn't a big issue. We went to church on Sunday. I don't even remember religion ever even being discussed." John Jurgensen, "Hollywood's Favorite Cowboy," The Wall Street Journal, last modified November 13, 2009, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704576204574529703577274572

bifurcate reality into “pure” spirit and “corrupt” matter. In the moral cosmology of both novels, goodness exists in the everydayness of human bodies acting and interacting. This is how sacramental theology is able to function as a moral source for O’Connor and McCarthy: the “sacred signs” of the sacraments are sites of divine enfleshment that invite the participants to experience the fullness of bodily existence. As Francis makes his return to Powderhead, and as father and son embrace each other in the freezing waters, the actors in these scenes participate in the sacred signs that remain their only hope for existential survival in a fundamentally chaotic and violent reality. Importantly, these are not moments of extended rest: after receiving his vision Francis is immediately propelled back to the city to prophesy for the sleeping children of God[48] while the man and boy remain as suffering pilgrims condemned to traverse their perilous road towards some uncertain destination. Despite the many differences that inhere between their respective novels, O’Connor and McCarthy are both centrally concerned with the nature of humanity’s desire for communion with the divine presence, whether or not this presence resides in a transcendent will, or in the immanence of human relationship.

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[48] “His singed eyes, black in their deep sockets, seemed already to envision the fate that awaited him but he moved steadily on, his face set toward the dark city, where the children of God lay sleeping.” O’Connor, *The Violent Bear it Away*, 243.

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