

A Tale of Two Churches: The Church, Performance, and Theater

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Each Sunday morning millions of Catholics across the United States and around the world go to mass at their neighborhood parishes. They are all familiar with the structure of the worship service, the kneeling, sitting, and standing motions, and the reception of the Eucharist at the end of every gathering. It does not occur to many Catholics today that the Catholic mass is a product of ancient pagan worship as well as worship practices found at different times in history, such as the Middle Ages and the Reformation. During all of these time periods of the Church's history, it incorporated performative elements into the mass to better convey its religious beliefs. Performative elements are those creative devices used by humans to represent themselves in an artistic way. These methods of expression can include singing, dancing, acting, sculpting, painting, drawing, among others. In this paper, I use performative elements and theatrical elements interchangeably. Throughout its history, the Catholic Church has also forged a partnership with theater through its use of drama. Although drama and religion are often viewed as two separate and non-intersecting spheres in today's society, the performative elements used in drama have helped humans express their religious ideas and beliefs since the invention of theater in ancient Greece. The Catholic Church has relied on performative elements to convey its religious beliefs to its members since the beginning of Christianity and still relies on them today. Because performative elements are heavily present in theater too, the Church and theater have forged a strong partnership. Although the entire Catholic Church relies on these performative

elements, Hispanics use more performative elements in their worship services than European-Americans.

One reason why performative elements exist in the Catholic Church today is because at the beginning of its formation, it incorporated many of the performative elements used by the ancient Greeks and Romans in their religious worship of pagan gods in order to suit the converts that made up the population of the infant Catholic Church. The Greek worship of Dionysus and the performative elements used in his worship, which would later be used in the Catholic mass, help explain why there are theatrical elements in the Catholic Church today as well as where some of them came from.

The formation of a religious cult dedicated to the worship of Dionysus, the Greek god of wine and fertility, influenced Christian worship even though at its beginning, the existence of Christianity was still hundreds of years away. From the beginning of this cult's existence in the pre-classical period, members used performance to make the existence of Dionysus a reality. The first performative element used to worship this god was dancing which was called "Dithyramb" (Brockett and Hildy 15). The worshippers thought this could help them achieve "ecstasy" or a leaving of their body in order to gain union with the one they worshipped (Harwood 41). In addition, the worshippers sacrificed an animal and ate its flesh in the belief that by eating this they would be in communion with Dionysus: "the animal was first dressed ritualistically to represent the god, for worshippers believed that the beast was an incarnation of Dionysus, so when it was torn apart and eaten they engaged in a sort of communion" (Harwood 42). Not only would the Catholic Church use a symbolic sacrifice in order to achieve union with its God, Jesus Christ, but it would also use this same performative element of ritualistically dressing its priests to set them apart from the congregation and allow them to act in the form of Jesus for the

consecration of the Eucharist. These were some of the early ways the Greeks worshipped Dionysus but as the popularity of this cult grew, the performative elements used in his religious worship would increase as well.

The most important religious festival for the ancient Greeks during the Classical period was the City Dionysia, the festival held in honor of the god Dionysus. This was not the only festival held in his honor nor was it the sole religious festival, but it was the most popular and contained the most theatrical elements, “in Athens, drama was not part of the festivals held in honor of other gods, although performative elements were prominent in almost all festivals” (Brockett and Hildy 23).

The Dionysia celebrated the resurrection of Dionysus. The myth surrounding this god declared that he was once killed, dismembered and resurrected (Brockett and Hildy 16). The first performative element of this festival was present from the very beginning of its celebration. A statue of Dionysus was pulled through the city streets, which was a way to make real the Greek belief that he actually attended this festival held in his honor (Burdick 12). The procession ended with a presentation of gifts and an animal sacrifice at the altar, which the entire city then ate (Brockett and Hildy 22). After the sacrifice had taken place, the city enjoyed the dramas of several Greek playwrights. This was a competition with winners announced at the end of the festival. The specific type of play used to honor this god was the Tragedy that often commemorated the struggle of humans against fate and portrayed the relationships of humans to themselves, others, and the gods. The actors in these Tragedies were “something like priests” (Burdick 21). They wore colorful costumes, which existed to “aid in the withdrawal from the everyday self” (Harwood 1). Although the actors were set apart from the audience by what they were wearing, during this style of worship there was no separation between the celebrants and

the congregation (Harwood 42). All members sought to join themselves with the reality of the drama and the presence of Dionysus. After several days of seeing plays, the judges announced the winners as well as the punishments for those who got too rowdy during the duration of the festival (Harwood 50). The City Dionysia is the first recorded incident of theater as we know it in the Western world today that would eventually make its way to the peninsula of Italy and the island of Sicily, Greek colonies located there, and thus to the city of Rome (Harwood 70).

These same performative elements were present in Greek and Roman religious festivals when Christianity arose. “The marriage of the Christian and pagan calendars now becomes central to this story, because the festivals of Christianity, like those of ancient Greece and Rome, were to play a vital part in the development of the new theater” (Harwood 79). Although Christianity would later influence this “new theater” by the use of drama as a means of teaching religious beliefs to its largely illiterate population, first the Catholic Church would have to adopt many of the Greek and Roman performative elements and incorporate them into the Catholic mass with the hope of using these elements to convey not the presence of the god Dionysus, but rather the presence of Jesus Christ. This was a brilliant idea since many of the early Christians were Greek or Roman and were familiar with using theatrical elements in the religious worship of their pagan gods. This made the transition from paganism to Christianity a smooth one and avoided the hardship of creating another means of conveying religious truths to new Christians. The performative elements found in this celebration would be gradually integrated into the Catholic Church as the Church struggled to incorporate the culture of its converts into its system of beliefs. Father Carl Hood, the priest at St. Therese’s Church said, “it is not a big scandalous secret that the Church picked things up from different cultures along the way. It is like traveling, you may get a map here and a hat there. However, the Church changed the meaning of these

performative elements to fit her.” For example, the Catholic Church would adopt the use of images to make the presence of Jesus and other holy people manifest in the Church, as well as make a metaphorical sacrifice in order to unite the congregation to its God, Jesus Christ. Although at first glance, it might seem like the Church did not adopt the practice of the use of drama within its worship services, this would soon change as the Medieval times demanded of the Catholic Church a new and simple way to convey religious beliefs to its illiterate population.

The conditions of the Middle Ages created a special need in the Catholic Church for more performative elements in order to convey its messages to its largely uneducated population. As the Roman Empire declined, drama declined as well (Chambers 2). The Catholic Church kept the performative elements it inherited from Greek and Roman pagan worship such as the use of images and the symbolic sacrifice, but because the Romans had specifically used theater as propaganda against the Christians, the Church did not condone the use of drama (Chambers 2). Although the Church did not approve of drama, its own ritual was full of drama: “the dramatic tendencies of Christian worship declared themselves at an early period” (Chambers 3). In fact, some argue that drama did not die between the decline of the Roman Empire and the Middle Ages when it was revived for religious purposes because the mass can be viewed as a drama. These scholars claim there was a “new birth of the drama in the very bosom of the Church’s own ritual” (Chambers 2). Whether the Church agreed that mass was a drama or not, it did recognize the serious need in the Middle Ages to educate the population about the mystery of Christ’s life as well as the rest of the Bible. This was a tough task for the Catholic Church of the Middle Ages because a majority of the population could not read or write, nor had access to a formal education. The Catholic Church gradually admitted drama within its doors in order to help the

population understand their religion and specifically, “the Church admitted theater to express its mysteries” (Harwood 78).

Before the Church employed drama to convey its beliefs, it began to use a wider range of performative elements within the Church. Many of these new elements took the form of symbolic objects, such as the clergy’s elaborate “costume” that indicated the Church season and feast days by the use of color and elaborate set designs that used a color system to express the Church season as well as images, which could come in different forms. “Painting and sculpture create symbolic figures which were instantly recognizable and which made the life and passion of Christ a vivid and familiar story” (Harwood 78). The use of images became the most popular way the Church could express Christ’s life as well as the lives of popular saints. It is said that these images served three purposes: to make man think of Christ’s life, to increase man’s affection towards Christ and the saints because “man is often more stirred by sight than by hearing or reading” and to “be a book to the uneducated” (Harwood 78). These images did achieve these three goals but in the process, the Church realized that other performative elements could also be beneficial.

The first use of drama to help the people understand the meaning of Easter was in the 10<sup>th</sup> century (Harwood 80). The Church thought it was important to portray the events of Christ’s death and resurrection because this event was re-enacted every Sunday during the consecration of the Eucharist. This dramatization used the trope, which became popular for other simple liturgical dramatizations. This was a special form, like a chorus which was chanted in the Church. The Easter trope was called “Quem Quaeritis.” The clergy dressed up to represent the three Mary’s and the angel at the tomb of Jesus. The clergy went on to act out a short scene from the Bible where the Mary’s come to Jesus’ tomb to anoint him for burial and the angel

announces he is risen. This was a simple dramatization but “the Easter trope is thought to be the beginning of Mediaeval drama” (Burdick 36).

The next dramas arose around the Christian holiday of Christmas and these presented the Church with a unique problem. The character of Herod created a controversy within the Church as the clergy wrestled with the question of if it was allowable to imitate an evil character within God’s house. Many Christmas dramas did end up including Herod but it demonstrates the conflicts that the Church grappled with as it incorporated what it viewed as something secular within its doors (Burdick 37). Father Carl Hood explains, “during the Middle Ages great cathedrals were used for theater and people did not view the Church as just a place for mass but they viewed everything as related and connected.” Drama within the Church gained popularity with clergy and congregation members alike, and soon the Catholic Church would expand the use of drama to celebrate other Catholic holidays and to help its population understand the Bible and other Catholic beliefs.

The Corpus Christi Procession first appeared in 1261 and used drama in a completely different way than the drama found in the simple Easter and Christmas dramatizations. This holiday was to celebrate the “Body of Christ” in the Church, or the Eucharist. The consecrated Eucharist was taken out of the Churches to the city streets to be presented to the people directly and as soon as this holiday appeared within the Church, the clergy and the congregation used performative elements to mark its significance. Floats appeared in the procession with Biblical characters such as Adam and Eve, as well as scenes from Christ’s life such as the Nativity. Instead of these floats, these scenes would soon be presented on wagons or small stages throughout the city that showed “Mystery and Miracle Plays.” (Harwood 84).

These “Mystery” and “Miracle” plays used dramatic elements to depict the story of man according to the Bible as well as the miracles and lives of famous saints (Harwood 84). These were presented in moving wagons with different scenes in each one or on a stage. As the popularity of these performances grew, there were committees and clergy members assigned with the task of planning these for specific times of the year as well as fundraising to pay for the elaborate costumes and set designs (Burdick 40). Also, as these became more common during Mediaeval times the Church allowed them to be done in the vernacular since the majority of the population did not speak Latin. It is said that these plays “kindled a theatrical flame which has continued to burn all over Europe” (Harwood 96). Although these plays did “kindle a theatrical flame,” this flame was almost extinguished during the Reformation when the use of drama within the Church would once again decline.

By the time of the Reformation, the Church had already been weakened internally by conflicts centered around the Pope as princes in different European nations vied for personal power and found themselves in conflict with the Catholic Church. When the Reformation began, reformers began questioning the practices of the Church, which ultimately led to the questioning of the popular morality and miracle plays. “Medieval religious plays, though at the height of their popularity, came to be viewed as provocations to controversy...they were discouraged almost everywhere” (Brockett and Hildy 117). In certain parts of Europe, reformers used drama negatively to promote their specific agenda. Henry VIII did this in England as he sought to break religious ties with the Catholic Church and establish himself as the head of the Church of England. In order to end the conflict, Elizabeth I banned the use of drama (Brockett and Hildy 117).

As the Catholic Church discouraged the use of drama and the religious plays lost popularity, the face of drama changed dramatically across Europe. Drama no longer received the financial aid from the Church or other donors, which made it hard for Europeans to produce them and many Europeans viewed drama as less important and no longer useful. “Beginning in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, drama was deprived of its religious and civic functions and henceforth, it had to wage a fight for recognition on purely commercial and artistic grounds” (Brockett and Hildy 118). Drama began to be less associated with the Church and more associated with secular ideas. The decline of the use of drama within the Catholic Church would coincide with a time when people began to look once more to the ancient art of theater in Greece and Rome to inspire the new drama that would take Europe by a storm.

This time period was known as the Renaissance. It was marked by humanism, or “a return to concern for the worth of humanity and earthly life, not merely as preparation for eternity, but as valuable in themselves” (Brockett and Hildy 121). The shift in drama from religious to secular as well as the new interest that European society took in humanity resulted in drama that focused on classical myths, historical events, and invented stories (Brockett and Hildy 122). These ideas first began in Italy and then traveled to other parts of Europe and soon Europeans were enjoying secular dramatic events in the royal courts for pure entertainment. This drama no longer demonstrated religious messages or beliefs and even had sexual jokes and political commentary. The only nation where drama remained associated with religion was in Spain “where the inquisition had established its unquestioned control over theology and drama” (Brockett and Hildy 117).

It is important to understand that the Catholic Church today was influenced by each of the time periods discussed above. In my observations at St. Therese’s and St. Michael’s, many of

the performative elements I discuss can be traced back to the influence that drama had in the Church at the time when it incorporated Greek and Roman religious worship into its mass, at the time when it relied on drama, images, and symbols to convey its religious beliefs to its uneducated members during the Middle Ages, or at the time when congregation members started to embrace humanism and consider this world just as important as the world to come.

My observations of worship practices at St. Therese's and St. Michael's will prove that the Catholic Church still relies on performative elements to convey its religious beliefs to its congregation member and that the Catholic worship service shares many of the same components that make up a theatrical performance. In addition, my research will show that the Hispanic congregation at St. Michael's uses more performative elements in its worship than the largely European-American congregation at St. Therese's. St. Therese's Catholic Church is located on Jackson Avenue in Memphis, Tennessee. It is comprised of about four hundred mostly European-American families and offers three worship services on weekends. The priest that serves this parish is Father Carl Hood who consecrates the Eucharist at every weekend service as well as every weekday service. St. Michael's Catholic Church is located on Summer Avenue and although it only serves a large European-American congregation, it also offers a Spanish mass on Sundays. For my research, I only observed the Spanish mass. The Church members who attend this mass are mostly from Mexico although there is a small population from other nations throughout Latin America. This Church offers four masses throughout the weekend. The priest who serves this congregation is Father Victor Ciaramitaro.

In my brief summary of the historical accrual of some performative elements into the fabric of the worship services of the Catholic Church, I have discussed its use of theater and drama to convey its religious messages to its congregation throughout the ages. The Church

shares many similarities with secular theater, such as the use of performers, an audience, a director, a theater space, design elements, and dramatic action embodied in a text. Because the Catholic Church uses all of these during mass, you can say that the mass is actually a theater event because “we discover that there are certain elements common to all theater. These elements are present whenever a theater event takes place; without them, an event ceases to be theater and becomes a different art form and a different experience” (Wilson and Goldfarb 10). Since the Church has all of these elements, however, its worship services are a sort of theatrical performance; Father Carl Hood says that many people would be surprised to hear the Church shares so much with theater. He says “we live in a very disconnected world where we do not put the pieces together. It is very departmentalized as a result of the Enlightenment and Descartes among others who changed education to be specialized. The Catholic Church is supposed to be connected, meaning everything comes from God and everything goes back to God.” If we adopt this view, this means that theater and religion are not necessarily two separate spheres but rather intersect and help each other further their goals.

The first element the Church shares with theater is the existence of performers. Performers are “people onstage presenting characters in dramatic action” (Wilson and Goldfarb 10). The performers during the Catholic worship service are the priests who present Jesus Christ’s dramatic action of breaking bread and drinking wine with his apostles during the Last Supper as recorded in the gospels. These “performers” not only act as Jesus Christ during the mass but in order to take on his character they actually adjust their lifestyle to resemble that of Christ’s. For example, priests live an unmarried life of chastity because Jesus lived this life to focus on his ministry and the priests have the obligation of living a lifestyle as closely related to the life Jesus lived as possible. A performer “stands in front of other people and begins to portray

a character-to speak and move in ways that convey an image of the character” (Wilson and Goldfarb 10). The time at which the priest speaks and moves in “ways that convey an image of the character” is during the time of the consecration of the Eucharist. At this time, the priest says the words that Jesus spoke at the Last Supper as he broke bread with his apostles. The priest also imitates Jesus’ actions at the Last Supper when he holds the bread and the wine up and breaks the bread. The priest imitates these actions by standing at the altar and holds the wine and bread up for Christ’s followers today, the congregation. Like performers in a theater, the audience “accepts for a time that a performer is actually someone else” and the Catholic congregation believes that this someone else is Jesus Christ who gave of himself during the Last Supper through bread and wine and who still gives of himself in this manner through the priest today.

As already noted, the second element that the Catholic Church shares with theater is the presence of an audience. “A theater, dance, or musical event is not complete-one could almost say it does not occur-unless there are people to see and hear it” (Wilson and Goldfarb 11). The audience during mass is comprised of the congregation who witness the priest act in the person of Christ during the consecration and who listen as other members of the congregation read from the gospel. The difference, however, between an audience at mass and an audience for other performances - such as a concert or play - is that, even if there are not people there to “see and hear it”, the event does take place since, according to Church doctrine, the presence of the congregation (audience) is not necessary to validate the consecration of the Eucharist. The consecration is authentic and actually becomes the body and blood of Christ, in the eyes of Catholics, as long as an actual priest says the words of Jesus at the Last Supper. The audience needs the work of the priest to validate their beliefs and make the expression of their faith, which is the acceptance of the Eucharist, public and in communion with the rest of the congregation.

The third element the Catholic Church shares with theater is the presence of a director or “the person who rehearses the performers and coordinates their actions to make certain that they interpret the text appropriately, intelligently, and excitingly” (Wilson and Goldfarb 12). The director in the worship service is the priest but unlike the world of secular theater, the Church has an ultimate director in the pope who mandates what happens at mass and any changes that occur. The Church has made changes in its worship service throughout the ages and certain things that were once unacceptable have varied with the different popes who rule the Church. For example, priests used Latin during mass and did not face the congregation during the consecration of the Eucharist but rather faced the altar with his back to the Church members. Now, the mass is said in the vernacular and the priest faces the congregation at all times during the worship service. This and other changes were made during the Second Vatican Council where the pope approved these that would change the Catholic worship service. In addition to the directorship of the pope, each priest at each parish answers to his superiors who are under the pope, such as the bishop and archbishop of each diocese. These superiors have more contact with the priests in their parish and can better help the priests in their performance since they live in the same city whereas the pope lives in Rome, Italy and can not offer much assistance directly to priests who live and work in Memphis.

The fourth element the Catholic Church shares with theater is the presence of a theater space. With any theater space “it is essential to have a stage, or some equivalent area where actors can perform and it is also essential to have a place for audience members to sit or stand” (Wilson and Goldfarb 12). Both St. Therese’s and St. Michael’s have separate spaces for the performers as well as the audience. The congregation sits in pews that occupy most of the space in the sanctuary and the priests occupy the front of the building where the altar, tabernacle

containing the consecrated Eucharist, and the pulpit stand. Parishioners approach this “stage” to receive Communion but rarely actually stand on the “stage” unless they are reading from the gospels or distributing the Eucharist.

The fifth element the Catholic Church shares with theater is design elements. Design elements include “visual aspects, costumes, lighting, and some form of scenic background-and a nonvisual aspect, sound” (Wilson and Goldfarb 12). Present at St. Therese’s and St. Michael’s are images similar to ones in the Middle Ages such as statues and sculptures among others. In these Churches (as in most Catholic Churches) the sanctuary is lined with the Stations of the Cross. These are comprised of fifteen plaques that each represent a scene from Christ’s death or resurrection. These stations are present throughout the entire year but carry a special significance during the Easter season, which I will discuss later. Another important visual element is the tabernacle, which is often a gold structure that stands at the front of the Church, is always elaborate, and sometimes has images of angels around it to signify its importance. The function of this container is to hold the consecrated body of Christ in between Church services. This has to be elaborate to show its significance because it is a box that actually contains God. Members of the congregation must bow if walking before it and it is kept locked when it is left alone. These practices allow the parishioner to show their reverence for the presence of Christ. The altar, likewise, is a significant visual element in the Catholic Church. The altar is always at the front of the Church and is bigger than the preaching pulpit. This is to show that the Catholic Church considers the sacrifice, or the Eucharist, as the pinnacle of its worship service and the most vital element in its beliefs.

In addition to these visual elements, with each season the Church adds items to reflect special occasions in the liturgical calendar. For example, during Christmas celebrations the

Church might line the altar with poinsettias since these are the Christmas flower or if the Church is celebrating Mary's Immaculate Conception the altar might be lined with lilies which signify her purity. Color also plays an important role in the "costumes" of the priests. The priest does not conduct the worship service in street clothes but must cover his clothes with Church vestments. This vestment is a different color depending on the time of the year. For example, during ordinary time the robes are always green, during Lent they are purple and during feast days of martyrs they are red. This is a signifier to the congregation of what is being celebrated during that particular mass. If the priest performed the mass in his street clothes, he would not be set apart from the congregation; however it is necessary that he be set apart from Church members because during the consecration of the Eucharist the Church believes that Christ is the one conducting the transformation and not the human priest. The robes serve as a visual reminder to the Church gathered before the altar and signify the priest as the performer and director of the worship service. Another important visual element found in Catholic Churches are candles which line the altar at every Church service and can be found in either the front of the Church or the side of the Church where members of the congregation light them as a reminder to others that prayers are needed for a certain someone. The candles around the altar are a masculine symbol. Father Carl Hood explains, "the candles and candle wax symbolize sperm. People do not usually immediately think of the candles as fertility symbols but these types of symbols are written all over the Church."

An important non-visual performative element in the Catholic Church is music. Both St. Therese's and St. Michael's Church have choirs that perform during the masses. Music during the worship service is extremely important and this importance is supported in the Bible: "The Bible clearly advocates a professional status for sacred music. It played a central role in the

liturgy worship from the earliest times” (Orr 86). Because of the importance placed on music, the Church takes the role of music very seriously. The role of music in the Catholic Church is to “show how to live more meaningfully and how to become part of a caring community” (Orr 27). The music chosen for each worship service often correlates with the message in the gospel or the occasion celebrated for that particular day. For example, if the Church will be celebrating the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary, the choir will often sing songs such as “Ave Maria”. In recent times, the Church has incorporated more modern songs into the worship service. The choirs in Catholic Churches consider the choice of music vital to the overall success of the worship service as a whole: “the music we choose can literally make or break worship” (Orr 103). The music that the choirs choose can “make or break worship” because it accompanies most parts of the mass and sets the mood in the Church, “selecting appropriate music for worship is not so much a question of style-as one of fitting in with the theme, mood, and spirit of worship” (Orr 103). The choir is responsible for singing at the entrance, a section responding to the first reading, at the offertory when the gifts, bread and wine are presented to the priest, during the distribution of Communion, and at the close of the service. Although the visual performative elements play a large role too, there is no doubt that music conveys the beliefs of the Catholic Church and influences the faith of the congregation.

The sixth element the Catholic Church shares with theater is a dramatic action embodied in a text: “this is a story, an incident, or an event that has been put into dramatic form...by performers or directors” (Wilson and Goldfarb 13). The priests perform the dramatic action of the Last Supper at every mass using the words of Christ as found in the Gospel account of this event. In addition, most of the mass is scripted with certain prayers and audience responses at every worship service. In fact, many scholars have claimed that the Catholic mass does not only

share characteristics with theater but can actually be viewed as a drama since it reenacts an incident and seeks to make Christ actually present through their words and actions.

The most important part of the Catholic mass, in fact the reason why Catholics gather together, is the consecration of the Eucharist and the reception of this Eucharist by each member of the congregation who is in the proper state to receive it. The mass can be described as “a dramatic commemoration of one of the most critical moments in the life of the founder” which celebrates the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ (Burdick 3). During the consecration of the Eucharist, the priest uses bread and wine to make Christ present. He does this by uttering the words of the Last Supper found in the gospels and after these words are uttered, the bread and wine, although they retain their appearance are believed by Catholics to be the actual body and blood of Jesus.

The consecration of the Eucharist is the most important ritual found in Catholicism. A ritual is defined as “a thing re-done or pre-done, a thing enacted or represented...the thing done is never religious, the thing done with heightened emotion is on its way to become so” (Fischer-Lichte 41). When Jesus Christ first spoke the words used in every Catholic Church today to consecrate the bread and wine into his body, Jesus’ actions were not yet a ritual. However, now since they are done specifically to commemorate Christ and make him present with an increased state of awareness on the behalf of the congregation, this is a ritual. Rituals are linked to drama and theater because the definition of a ritual can easily be applied to what theater seeks to accomplish: “in all religion, as in all art, there is the element of make-believe. Not the attempt to deceive, but a desire to re-live to represent” (Fischer-Lichte 41). In today’s society, most people believe that theater and religion are separate and that theater is something “fake” while religion is something “real.” However, both seek to “re-live” and “represent” events and people. Religion

and theater are so closely related that one gave birth to the other. Religion uses rituals to convey ideas and beliefs and it has been said that theater evolved from religious rituals (Fischer-Lichte).

Frederick Nietzsche wrote a book in which he claimed that the ritual of sacrifice is the oldest and most basic tradition found in nearly all societies and that this ritual led to the invention of theater in ancient Greece. Erika Fischer-Lichte in *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* lends credence to Nietzsche's claim: "Greek tragedy in its oldest form dealt only with the sufferings of Dionysus...all the celebrated characters of the Greek stage are merely masks of that original hero, the god who himself experiences the sufferings of individuation" (Fischer-Lichte 18). The ancient Greeks physically sacrificed to Dionysus to create communion between themselves and the deity; the dramatic performances of the City Dionysia served this purpose also, allowing the Greeks to represent Dionysus through the portrayal of different characters on stage, as well as define their own relationship to him through the medium of performance.

This is one similarity between the Eucharist and the Greek tragedy but some have claimed that the mass is actual ritual drama just like the ancient Greek tragedy: the mass can be interpreted "as ritual drama that presents certain compelling parallels with Greek tragedy; a Fall from grace, suffering, the renewal of life. Christ may even be regarded as a tragic hero in whom the congregation, the people, place their faith" (Harwood 78). The Eucharist does not just have parallels with Greek tragedy but is a tragedy in itself. Many of the tragedies dealt with relationships between humans and gods as well as human struggles; the Eucharist presents the biggest dilemma of humanity, which is the struggle to gain eternal life and the recognition that humans are fallen creatures and cannot obtain this by themselves. Jesus is the main character in the tragedy of the Eucharist one with whom all the congregation members can relate: although he himself was divine and struggled with human conditions, such as poverty, fear, and stress and the

human desire to break free from human restraints and gain friendship with God. He accomplishes what humans cannot accomplish alone but can gain through their faith in his actions which are commemorated and made present at the same time in the Eucharist through the priest. “Our tragic author—that is the celebrant, represents by his gestures in the theater of the Church before the Christian people the struggle of Christ, and teaches them the victory of redemption” (Harwood 78). Not only is the Eucharist viewed as a tragedy similar to the ancient Greek ones, but it is also viewed as a drama that could be performed in theaters across the nation and world. “Precisely because sacraments are best understood as actions and not things, it is in the theater of dramatic action that they are best understood” (Beckwith 60). The sacrament of the Eucharist is also best understood in the context of theater because “both celebrants and congregation had temporarily to abandon the self and their rational beliefs and practical behavior in the conscious world, and this can happen most powerfully when we enter the dimension of drama, a heightened state of awareness in which our spirit and imagination are free to explore what lies behind the everyday surface. (Harwood 78) When people go to theater, they go with the intention of leaving behind reality and watching something intently with their undivided attention. The state of being a person is in when watching a theatrical production is much different than when this person is in reality. This is also true about the members of the congregation during the Eucharist. They come to Church specifically for the Eucharist and intend to leave behind their realities during this time. They have an increased awareness of the significance of the Eucharist and give themselves up for a time to join with the other Catholics who share the beliefs. Not only do attending theatrical performances and participating in the drama of the Eucharist require a certain mindset, but the act of the Eucharist itself is a dramatic action: “the transformation of matter by means of priestly mystery is in itself an act of great drama requiring the audience, the congregation to submit to what reason will not explain” (Harwood 78).

The Catholic Church uses symbols and signs to convey the beliefs behind the Eucharist in order to try to make this important sacrament more understandable to the congregation. It uses the language of the Church to say the words of consecration so that the church members can understand the actions of the priest and the Church uses bread and wine, objects common to most people, to make Christ present. Father Carl Hood says the Church uses such symbols because “Jesus used the most common elements of the Earth to convey ideas, such as water, bread, wine, and oil.” The Church continues to use these common objects to symbolize beliefs. Theater also uses signs and symbols to convey messages: “anything onstage begins to signify, to point to, represent, or become of or about something else” (Beckwith 62). Everything “onstage” during the consecration of the Eucharist is also symbolic and pointing to something else. Catholics believe the Eucharist is the body and blood of Christ but no Catholic comes to the Church expecting to see human flesh and blood upon the altar. Everything points to Christ during this sacrament but you will not see Christ actually present. The broken bread stands for his broken body, the wine mixed with water stands for his blood mixed with humanity and the words spoken are a sign to the congregation that Jesus is among them in the Eucharist and through the priest consecrating the bread and wine.

There is controversy around the idea that the Eucharist is theater: “That the central sacrament, the body of Christ in the mass was theater, constituted the very bases of the searching and polemics of reform” (Beckwith 60). People are uncomfortable with viewing the Eucharist as theater because people view religion as something sacred and to say that it is theater to some might be to say that religion is something secular and artificial. However, theater helps humans leave their everyday consciousness and enter a different dimension where they can observe and participate in situations usually closed to them, and uses symbols and signs to represent ideas and

beliefs being demonstrated to the audience. This is exactly what the Eucharist does as well. Seeing the Eucharist as theater should not be negative but should rather be a way that Catholics and non-Catholics alike can better understand the sacrament as well as better understand the function of theater.

The Catholic Church today also uses other forms of drama similar to the kind used in the Middle Ages. As I discussed earlier, the first simple dramatizations in the Church focused on Easter and Christmas and today there are still dramatizations centered on these two important holidays. The Easter dramatizations use the Stations of the Cross to remember the Crucifixion and the importance to the lives of Christians everywhere. Every Friday during Lent, the congregation gathers while Church members stand next to the station, read the description of the event, and say a small prayer. The congregation rotates from station to station until they have visited all fifteen. Usually on one Friday close to the end of Lent, the congregation will have a “Living Stations of the Cross” where Church members dress like the characters in the station. For example, there will be a Jesus, a Virgin Mary, soldiers, etc. At each station, the congregation members will act out the event until all fifteen scenes are completed.

This drama is similar to the early Easter dramas of the Middle Ages and it helps the congregation grasp the importance of the sacrifice of Christ that the Church still celebrates every Sunday through the Eucharist. The trope is no longer used but the angel at the tomb and the three Marys going to anoint Jesus still play a large role in the “Living Stations of the Cross.” Acting out what Jesus went through for humanity increases devotion and understanding of the Eucharist and reminds Church members that when the priest consecrates the Eucharist every Sunday he is recalling the events of Christ’s death and resurrection, the ones acted out on this occasion.

Besides the Stations of the Cross, the Easter season also offers the Church other opportunities for using drama to convey the importance of this event. One such occasion is when the priest imitates Christ's actions at the Last Supper when he washes his apostles' feet. The priest washes the feet of several congregation members to imitate Christ. This event is significant because it shows that the priest's job is to live a Christ-like life and serve the congregation as Christ showed he was humble and there to serve others when he washed his apostles' feet.

The Church also uses drama to represent the Nativity scene. This is usually done during the midnight mass on Christmas Eve and includes the Virgin Mary, Joseph, the three wise men, angels, the baby Jesus, and other actors. This Nativity scene depicts Christ's birth and is similar to the ones presented in the Middle Ages. It is necessary to use drama to depict Christ's birth to show the importance of this event since the salvation that Catholics believe Jesus offers them could never have occurred without the birth. Sometimes the Churches show a Christmas play to the congregation as well where the scenes of Christ's birth are actually acted out instead of the still Nativity scene.

After Easter, during the month of May, the Church crowns the Blessed Virgin Mary. This event uses the image of Mary as well as symbolic items to convey her importance in the Church. A young girl wears white to symbolize purity and crowns a statue of the Virgin Mary with a crown made of flowers while other girls place flowers at the statue's feet; the flowers given to Mary are often white lilies or another pale colored flower, which symbolize her eternal virginity and pureness of heart. The crown symbolizes her place as queen of heaven and Earth while the young girl who crowns the Virgin symbolizes the children of Mary since she is the mother of all the saved.

In my observations at St. Therese's and St. Michael's, I noticed differences between the congregations. I attended mass several times at St. Michael's which hosts a Spanish mass every Sunday afternoon. I was interested in seeing if the Hispanic Catholics of St. Michael's Church conduct their worship services differently than the mostly European-American Catholics of St. Therese's. I discovered that the Hispanics infuse their distinct culture into their worship services through traditional music and a special devotion to the Virgin de Guadalupe. They also use more images and decorations as well as celebrate holidays not present in non-Hispanic congregations.

The music at St. Michael's is very different from the music found during the mass at St. Therese's. At St. Therese's, the choir sings most of the music with hardly any solos and little use of instruments. At St. Michael's, however, the parish uses guitars, pianos, maracas, and more. To accompany or augment vocal music, the Hispanics have members of the choir sing solos during the distribution of Communion and at other designated times throughout the mass. Music also plays a larger role at the worship services at St. Michael's than at the ones at St. Therese's. The songs are much longer and more festive. At St. Therese's the congregation will usually only sing one or two verses of each song but the parishioners at St. Michael's sing each song in its entirety and uses every opportunity for music. When I spoke with Father Victor Ciaramitaro, the priest at St. Michael's, about the music he said "the music is culturally more Latin American. They like and use their own music. It is more joyous and festive than European-American congregations."

The Virgin of Guadalupe plays an extremely large role in the faith of the Hispanics at St. Michael's and their worship services. This is a title given to the Virgin Mary, who on December 12, 1531, appeared to an indigenous man named Juan Diego outside Mexico City. The Virgin told him to visit the Bishop and request that a Church be built. The Bishop refused until he saw a miracle. The Virgin Mary made roses appear and when Juan Diego gave the roses to the

Bishop there was also her image on his cloak. The Bishop granted the Virgin Mary's request to build a Church in her honor and thousands of converts were made in her name. She is the patroness of Mexico and Latin America. An enormous statue of the Virgin of Guadalupe stands at the back of St. Michael's. A statue depicting this particular apparition of the Virgin Mary is not hard to spot because they all look the same; she is wearing a green and gold robe with a veil. At this parish, there are also candles underneath the elevated statue so the parishioners can light them in petition for their needs. This is a unique aspect of St. Michael's because no such statue exists at St. Therese's. There are also other images of Mary at St. Michael's but the Hispanic parishioners consider the Virgin of Guadalupe as theirs and take extra care to make sure there are flowers and decorations surrounding her image. Father Victor Ciaramitaro says "the Virgin of Guadalupe plays an enormous role in the faith of the Hispanics. This is their image of the Blessed Virgin. That is how she chose to reveal herself to them and they consider her to be one of them." In addition to honoring her through her statue, the parishioners also petition her during the mass when the Church offers their prayers as a group. This is also an aspect of the Hispanic worship service at St. Michael's that is not found at St. Therese's.

The Hispanic congregation petitions her and honors her statue during most Sunday services but a special day is also dedicated to her in which the congregation has special festivities in her honor, which include performative elements. This occurs on December 12 and is not only celebrated at St. Michael's but is also celebrated at Hispanic churches throughout the nation and world. At this celebration, dancers perform indigenous dances in the Virgin's honor and a special altar is prepared for her in the church. The Church members have a special mass and then often celebrate afterward with traditional food and more entertainment. When I asked Father Victor Ciaramitaro how his congregation celebrates this he said: "the celebration is the biggest of the

year. It lasts a full 24 hours beginning with a traditional dinner and then a midnight mass. The next day the entire congregation takes her image through the Memphis streets in a procession that concludes at the cathedral with another mass in her honor. There is more food and celebration throughout this day.”

The Celebration on December 12 to commemorate the Virgin’s apparition in Mexico is not the only additional holiday that the Hispanics celebrate. This congregation also celebrates “The Day of the Dead” from October 31st through November 2<sup>nd</sup> to remember the deceased of the Hispanic community. Hispanics dedicate masses during these days to pray for the deceased who still might be in purgatory or wandering the Earth. In their homes, they set up altars to remember dead family members. These altars have favorite food, drinks, and items of the person they are remembering. Hispanics believe on this day, their dead visit, walk the earth, and can actually enjoy the items upon their altar. The Church plays an important role in this holiday because it coincides with All Soul’s day and All Saints’ Day. When the Church was still young in Latin America and fighting to convert the indigenous population, the natives had a holiday similar to this one to remember their dead. The Catholic Church allowed this tradition to continue as long as it correlated with Catholic feast days. This was another example of the Church incorporating cultures and traditions of new converts into its own worship.

The Hispanic congregation at St. Michael’s use a number of visual elements not found at St. Therese’s. These include more candles, statues to saints, and flowers. Every Sunday at St. Michael’s the altar is completely surrounded and covered with lit candles. This is different from St. Therese’s because there are only candles at each corner of the altar. Also, St. Michael’s have statues of many saints in the parish, including the Virgin de Guadalupe, St. Michael, Jesus, and

others which serve as small “shrines” with candles surrounding them and a kneeling bench for parishioners to utilize when they wish to pray to that particular saint.

The differences between the performative elements found in the Hispanic congregation at St. Michael’s and the largely European-American population found at St. Therese’s might occur for several reasons. First, the Hispanics were converted by Spaniards. The Catholicism found in Spain during the time it was converting indigenous populations in Latin America (around the same time the Reformation was rocking most parts of Europe) was very different from that found in Europe. Spain established a strong loyalty to the Catholic Church in the 1400s when Queen Isabella and King Ferdinand expelled the Jews and Muslims. Absolute loyalty was demanded of Spaniards and the institution of the Inquisition made it even more dangerous to deviate from Rome. When the Reformation swept through Europe, Spain resisted it completely. There were few reforms in Spain and the Catholicism found in the rest of Europe during the Middle Ages remained largely untouched in Spain. This Catholicism utilized drama and many performative elements including the use of images among others to convey its beliefs. This was a contrast to post-Reformation Europe , which began to focus more on words with the emphasis placed on the Bible and the spread of the printing press. Latin America inherited the Spanish style of Catholicism which it still shows today while European Catholics began to focus more on words and language to convey their beliefs. This is why the Hispanic congregation at St. Michael’s still uses more performative elements in their worship service such as the use of images of saints, the presence of candles and small shrines throughout the sanctuary and the use of traditional and festive music.

Another reason why the congregation at St. Michael’s uses more performative elements is because their culture at the time of their conversion to Catholicism was completely different

than the culture of Europe. Indigenous tribes dominated Mexico, Central America, and South America at the time of the arrival of the Spaniards. Father Victor Ciaramitaro says, “the Hispanic congregation is much more vivacious than your typical European-American one. They incorporate a lot of their Indian culture into their music and ways of worship.” This culture was rich in festivals devoted to their gods, which used performative elements much like those found in ancient Greece and Rome. Many of these elements were incorporated into the Catholicism in this area. Father Victor Ciaramitaro says, “The Catholic Church adapts to the culture wherever it is, be it Africa, South or Central America.” Because this area of the world was converted only about 500 years ago compared to the Europeans who came into contact with Christianity much sooner, many of these performative elements survive in the worship services today, such as the indigenous dancing used to worship the Virgin of Guadalupe.

After conducting my research, I learned that the Catholic Church used performative elements at different times throughout its history. I learned that it included many of the performative elements it found in ancient Greece and Rome including the use of a dramatic and symbolic sacrifice to make the presence of Christ present at every mass. This was one of the first performative elements the Catholic Church used and it tied the Church to the use of drama and symbols to convey its messages to its population. This marriage between the Church and drama was not always present throughout history due to circumstances such as the presence of chaos throughout Europe between the decline of the Roman empire and the rise of the Middle Ages, as well as the time of the Reformation throughout today. Today we view the Church and drama as two separate things because of a lack of knowledge of Church history as well as a refusal of many to recognize that theater and the Church seek to do much of the same thing but in different settings. If we look closely at the Catholic Church, we can not only see the existence of

performative elements within its doors but we can also see the close ties between theater, drama, and the Church. Although performative elements exist at both churches, St. Michael's uses more because of the large Hispanic population. This population uses more performative elements because of their unique culture and history. Studying the Hispanic congregation at St. Michael's would be useful to any person who wishes to argue there are no ties between the Catholic Church, the use of drama, and performative elements because these are especially apparent there. By studying and acknowledging the presence of these elements as well as the use of drama and the similarities with theater, theater can be better understood as well as the function of drama.

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