

## **Christian Story as Ritual Engagement The American Liturgical Renewal in the Rise of Narrative Theology**

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### ***What Are We Doing in the Liturgy?***

This is the leading question that the twentieth century reformers of the American liturgical movement sought to answer. The question was raised from the assumption that the Christian liturgy had always carried the responsibility for telling God's story to succeeding generations in word and action. In the ritual retelling of the Christian narrative, "The participants' absorption into the story is made possible through their absorption of the story in and through its ritual enactment. They are not simply witnesses of the story, but characters within it" (Loughlin 1996, 223).

The catalyst for the modern Catholic liturgical renewal was not the rejection of doctrine but the gradual realization that the propositional theology that had dominated the church must find expression in a pastoral theology that could make the stories of the Christian tradition (creation, redemption, and sanctification) once more the stories out of which people live their lives. Historian Maurice Wiles describes the effect of a changed world-view – in which modern Catholicism found itself – with the presumption that propositional statements of the faith are definitive, "A "true" doctrinal statement (though the phrase is less simple than appears on the surface) can, it may be admitted, never lose its truth, but it can lose its relevance" (Wiles 1975, 9).

The purpose of this analysis is to support the claim that the work of the early liturgical reformers of Europe and the United States influenced the subsequent rise of Christian narrative theology. From this perspective, liturgical reform was the bridge between a systematic understanding of the faith tradition and a narrative engagement in the Christian story through the process of ritual enactment by which the beliefs of the faith enter into the lives of believers. The liturgy, understood by the early reformers in the Pauline metaphor of "the body of Christ", conveys the mysteries of the faith in a form of "enacted metaphor". What we do in the liturgy is participate in a ritual retelling of the Christian story where the beliefs of the faith are embodied in signs, symbols, movement and gestures, "and by such participation people enter into the life of Christianity" (Tilley 1990, 5).

### ***The European Response***

The rally cry of the liturgical movement first heard in twentieth century Europe and soon after in America was "active participation". It was a phrase originally coined by Pope Pius X with his mandate for the restoration of the Gregorian chant to replace the operatic music that was played on organs in the churches of Italy at the time. Under the European renewal in Benedictine spirituality, and principally the work of Dom Lambert Beauduin, the reform for "active participation" was broadened to a total framework of pastoral reorientation to liturgical practices among the Christian faithful. What Beauduin

and his contemporaries at monasteries throughout Europe advocated was a “democratization of the liturgy” that had been overshadowed by historical, cultural and theological developments since the period of the Reformation.

Beauduin employed the analogy of grammar and speech to explain how participation in the liturgy discloses the experience of God’s manifesting and revealing presence such that, “It is within the liturgical celebration of Christmas [for example] that the grammar of the incarnation comes to actual speech” (Whalen 1996, 71). Instruction in the word (catechesis) can lead to an understanding and love of the mysteries but without religious participation in rituals, symbols and myths, Christianity becomes dangerously cerebral and abstract (Tracey 2002, 214). Beauduin understood the Christian’s active participation in the liturgy as a “filling in of the gaps” of the Christian experience which religious instruction alone could never supply. As a re-presentation of the Paschal Mystery in both word and sacrament, Christian ritual engages the heart and the imagination in the experience of the sacred that paradigmatically is both the participation in the transcendence and immanence of God. Theologian David Tracy describes how the Christian symbol system mediates the “event of Jesus Christ” that is normatively codified in the text named scriptures (2002, 249). He writes:

The prelinguistic always precedes and envelops even as it is transformed by the linguistic power of proclamation. Kerygma ultimately joins logos. Word becomes sacrament. Manifestation envelops every word from beginning to end even as it allows itself to be transformed by the shattering paradigmatic power of the proclaimed word (2002, 215).

The European liturgical reformers made the connection between the rise of modernity and the decline of the overtly ritualized and embodied form of liturgy that was characteristic of Christian worship in the early and medieval church. The Enlightenment had fostered an exaggerated rationality centered on truth as knowledge whereby, “Knowledge became an increasingly mental phenomenon in which the mind, experienced as divorced from the prejudices of the body’s passions and senses, provided valid knowledge” (Mellor and Shilling 1997, 24). One result was the reliance on a manual or propositional approach to pastoral theology (the catechism) over a traditional emphasis on liturgical and sacramental formation. A second perspective concerned the growing sense of the ‘self’ along more individualistic lines that marginalized the sense of the corporeal in Christian community. The rise of popular devotions and the concurrent declines in Eucharistic celebration were expressive of this more private religious identity. Finally, the apologetic stance of the church in response to the Protestant reformation and its suspicion of ritual expression were seen as influencing a more rational and less ritualistic approach to Christianity in Catholic circles.

The locus of the European pastoral reform to the liturgy is found in its theology of revelation. Drawing on the mystery theology teachings of Odo Casel (18<sup>th</sup> century), European liturgical reformers sought to restore the theology of revelation in the Mystical Body of Christ that had been central to the early church and the Church Fathers. This theology understood the human relationship with God was made possible through the Incarnation of Jesus of Nazareth. As a sacramental theology, Christian formation was based in the collective embodiment and ritual expression of the liturgy as the reenactment of the Paschal Mystery. It was a model of ritual engagement that French liturgical

scholar, Robert Cabie, describes as overtaken by the emphasis on rationality and cognitivism in the post-Tridentine church. He writes:

Following the post-Tridentine focus on religious education, when the catechetical instruction of children was given an organized form in the seventeenth century, there developed a tendency to correlate years of catechetical instruction with the reception of the initiation of the sacraments. Thus an educational model corresponding to development and chronological age, rather than a sacramental model of Christian formation, was increasingly adopted (1988, 75).

In his classic work, European reformer Romano Guardini (*The Spirit of the Liturgy*) taught a full participation in the liturgy fashioned after the Divine Office as the supreme form of communal prayer in which “the whole gathering should take an active share in the proceedings” (1930, 26). Guardini made the critical distinction between “active participation” as merely listening and repeating the words of the priest and a ritualized engagement that held the potential to transform individual and collective identities in the story of the religious community. Full participation in the Mystery of Christ was the experience of anamnesis – the command of Jesus to “Do this in remembrance of me” – assuring “the act each time acquires fresh content and fresh fervour, and an intensification of ardour is the result” (1930, 27). The importance of the physical and material elements of the liturgy (vestment, implements, days and hours) were the symbols they signified.

Guardini’s emphasis on the symbolic language of the liturgy – the language of ritual – was not an aesthetic conviction but an epistemological one. He considered the meaning and power of symbol to be “the apprehension of the affinity between the spiritual and the physical” (1930, 82). Symbolic action in the liturgy is a ritual form of embodied knowing since rituals always place importance on the physical actions of bodies as they enact important symbolic performances by means of highly formalized and prescribed action, movement and gesture (Kavanagh 1984). In the ritual marriage of form and content, “the message is to be found in the medium itself” (Torevell 2000, 24).

Pecklers observes that Guardini’s writings were initially highly controversial but later [Vatican II] valued as a source “of a very positive and rich view of the Church as the Mystical Body of Christ which expresses itself relationally and symbolically through the sacraments” (1988, 6). In the European effort to provide a pastoral theology centered on the liturgy as ritual engagement, verbal language is secondary to a symbolic one and participation in the liturgy breaks open the word through liturgical signs that teach “non-discursively, richly, ambiguously, elementally” (Kavanagh 1974, 41).

### ***The American Response***

The work of Dom Virgil Michel of St. John’s Abbey helped to transplant much of the European liturgical thinking to America. Michel understood the liturgical problem to be fundamentally one of catechesis, a “catechesis uprooted from its constitutive liturgical base” (Whalen 1996, 121). He assessed the solution was not simply a matter of inserting the liturgy into religious education, but the recognition of the personal/relational knowing of religious truths that contextualize the Christian story in the life of the believer through liturgical participation. Michel states:

We have given abundant religious instruction. But only too often such instruction has aimed chiefly at information of mind and not the living of faith.

Just as Christ is the Way, the Truth and the Life, or King, Teacher and Priest – so all religion consists of morals, truths, and worship. To teach Catholic truths without relating these truths both theoretically and practically to actual worship, which is a living of these truths in real union with Christ, is a terrible neglect of the duty of religious instruction (1935, 495).

The Mystical Body of Christ core to Michel's theology related the role of ritual engagement in the liturgy to "the adaptation of the mystery of God to our human condition" (Whalen 1996, 126). The ritual materials of water, wine, bread and oil combined with movements, gestures, words and silence were understood by Michel in the classic definition of a sacrament – an outward sign of an inward grace. He distinguished between an abstract knowledge of the signs and a ritual participation in the signs that is both personal and experiential. He writes:

For that reason its [liturgy] prayer is verbal, and is accompanied by visible actions, and frequently expressed in musical form. Everywhere the liturgical worship calls for gestures and postures, for actions, all of which are intimately related with prayer sentiments and are in fact the working out of the later. The simple sign of the cross, in word and action, is a striking example... The external actions properly understood thus intensify the lessons contained in the formulae of worship which they interpret (1940, 531).

Michel's reference to the form and rhythm of the liturgy in the "working out" of prayer sentiments (or intentions), suggests the language of the liturgy as embodied metaphor. The action of the liturgy places the meaning or implicit "lessons" of doxology in an affective context. Michel taught that the experience of the liturgy was itself liturgical catechesis but that liturgy must be rooted in texts as well as contexts. In this way, theological reflection on the liturgy was a secondary but necessary step. Gloria Durka provides a more contemporary explanation of the role of imagination and symbolic action in liturgy's affective dimension when she says:

The depreciation of the signitive, conceptual and analytical aspects of human life and the benign neglect of the symbolic, mythical, imaginative and emotive aspects have atrophied our religious imagination. Christian spirituality has a symbolic-signitive, mythic-conceptual and imaginative-analytical and rational-emotive character. Inherent in every individual religious experience is the passionate need to express socially, through creative word and action, the wholeness of life. Correspondingly, every verbal expression or behavioral act shared in community must secure itself in the world of transcendent experience, ritual and myth (1990, 38).

If one pole of Michel's distinct expression of the European liturgical reform was the relationship between liturgy and catechesis, a second was the relation between liturgy and social justice. Whalen observes, "it has become commonplace for contemporary authors writing on the relationship between liturgy and justice to note that Virgil Michel was one of the early prophets who explored that relationship" (1996, 161). Michel's thinking was rooted in the doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ and the idea that ritual

participation in the body of Christ provides a bridge between individual and community. The liturgy's transforming power is found in its unity of intellect and intuition in the ritual act of shared community. Christian sacramental participation transforms the ethics of duty and obligation to the sacred reality of oneness in our personal and social history. It is on this basis that Michel taught participation in the Mystical Body of Christ as the Christian source of social regeneration. He writes:

The [doctrine of the Mystical Body] is not merely an abstract doctrine or truth of our Christian lives, but one that should be the basis of our every thought and action as Christians...By becoming members of the Mystical Body of Christ through Baptism, we no longer belong to ourselves alone but above all to Christ and His cause (1935, 541).

Michel's work in the early years of the twentieth century liturgical reform provided four defining principles that influenced its growth as a national religious movement. These include a theology of revelation rooted in the Mystical Body of Christ; the support for the ritual aspects of liturgical engagement that could be aided by greater understanding of the liturgy (i.e. liturgical catechesis) so that the laity could more fully participate in the spirit of worship; the communal nature of the liturgy which relates the liturgy to the church's social mission and the role of experience as a category of knowing (not just psychological but epistemological) in the ritual retelling of the Christian story. As the movement progressed leading up to the Second Vatican Council, new developments in the theology of revelation and catechesis/religious education would be in tension with some of the foundational dimensions of the liturgical reform.

### ***Liturgical Renewal Comes of Age***

In addition to his own intellectual product, Michel did much to advance the growth of the liturgical movement in the establishment of a media enterprise that helped to unify the American renewal (i.e. *The Liturgical Press* and *Orate Fratres/Worship*). From the earliest days of the movement, there were multiple centers of renewal and the diversity of American contributors to this project was a distinct characteristic of the movement in this country. Hughes notes:

Active participation became the goal of the liturgical movement, a goal to be achieved by numerous means...In the early days of the movement every skill was joined – that of the writer, the theologian, the historian, the social activist, the musician, even the philanthropist...Most wandered into the liturgy through the back door, through scripture, systematics, patristics or history for example, or as writers and translators (Hughes 1990, 3).

The founding of the National Conference in 1941 by the United States Conference of Bishops galvanized these diverse centers of reform into a national religious movement. The Conference “gave liturgical renewal a popular, pastoral outlet” (Kinast 1997, 1242). Inspired by the Benedictine model that preceded it, the Conference adopted the practice of liturgical weeks and these National Weeks (as they were named) transformed the work of the Conference to a focus on annual parish missions where “it was to some extent a

traveling road show – moving its secretariat to whatever diocese had invited it for the week and passing the time in relative obscurity otherwise” (Reeder 1998, 806). The main thrust of the National Weeks was the popular education of adult Catholics for full and active participation in the liturgy. The work of the Conference was both validated and accelerated with the appearance of two encyclicals endorsing liturgical reform in the universal church, *Mystici Corporis* (1943) and *Mediator Dei* (1947). In a single introductory paragraph, Pope Pius XII validated the more than one-hundred year old European theology of the Mystical Body of Christ and the theology of revelation core to the liturgical renewal as a generative sacramental principle of Catholic life:

The doctrine of the Mystical Body of Christ, which is the Church, was first taught by the Redeemer Himself. Illustrating as it does the great and inestimable privilege of our intimate union with so exalted a Head, this doctrine by its sublime dignity invites all those who are drawn by the Holy Spirit to study it, and give them, in the truths of which it proposes to the mind, a strong incentive to performance of such good works as are comfortable to its teaching (*Mediator Dei*, #1).

The document also made transparent the connection between liturgical participation and Catholic social action that had been core to the teachings of Virgil Michel and can be traced to the writings of his European predecessors, notably Lambert Beauduin. Liturgical scholar Gerald Ellard, among the original founding editors of *Orates Fratres/Worship*, developed the connection (*Christian Life and Worship* (1933) and *Men at Work: The Liturgical Movement Comes to America* (1938). Ellard expressed the aim of a popular education in “living the liturgy” as “to initiate a generation to the integral unity of liturgy and life which provided the understanding of the communal nature of Christian life and its expression through liturgical participation” (Tuzik 1990, 170).

The momentum of the movement was carried by the vast range of popular liturgical books directed to adult Catholics. One notable figure in this regard is Mary Perkins Ryan. Ryan’s association with the movement preceded the National Conference with a series a publications in which she advocated for a more active and full participation in the liturgy by making accessible the sacramental meaning of the liturgy and its ritual expressions (*At Your Ease in the Catholic Church* (1937), *Your Catholic Language* (1938) and *Speaking of How to Pray* (1941). Ryan was skilled in Latin translation and wrote to overcome the prevalent non-participation in the liturgy with a liturgical catechesis that translated the prayers of the Mass into the vernacular and provided a pastoral theological context for the explaining the sacraments and other liturgical practices. Her conviction that the liturgy was the ideal normative basis of Christian formation and her emphasis on Christianity as a religion for adults led to her publication, inspired she thought from the pastoral directions of the Second Vatican Council, *Are Parochial Schools the Answer?* (1964).

The book’s controversial reception related to Ryan’s criticism that the Catholic schools system was an inadequate educational model for the church in the modern world. Ryan took seriously the teachings of *Sacrosanctum Concilium* and the general principle it offered to guide liturgical renewal that the “Church earnestly desires that all the faithful should be led to that full, conscious and active participation in liturgical celebrations

which is demanded by the very nature of the liturgy” and “the aim is to be considered above all else” (SC 14). Liturgical reform included both reforms to the rites themselves in making the sacramental signs easier to understand, but also, as Ryan so adamantly stressed, the call for a serious program of liturgical education that could not be accommodated under the present schooling approach.

### ***The Kerygmatic Theology Movement***

The understanding of the liturgical renewal in America in the rise of narrative theology is incomplete without exploring how this movement intersected with a second movement in theology and education, the so-called kerygmatic theology movement. The work of Josef Jungmann (1885 – 1975) and his principle spokesperson in the United States, Johannes Hofinger, a leader in the six International Catechetical Study Weeks (1959 – 1968), shared a common point of departure with the liturgical renewal movement in their assessment that the propositional theology of the church was the root cause of the perceived “lifelessness in the modern church” (Boys 1989). In the kerygmatic call for a return to the sources, the model of the early church at worship which expressed itself in the proclamatory nature of the good news of salvation in Christ pointed to a pastoral theology grounded in kerygma. Jungmann proposed a narrative theology of the Christian story in the biblical narrative of “salvation history”:

[Jungmann] made “salvation history (*Heilgeschichte*) a central theme in his proposals: God’s progressive revelation in history was anticipated in the Old Testament, and brought to fulfillment in Christ in the New Testament, and continues in the church. By always emphasizing this motif, a proper hierarchy of truths would result. Christ would be the center from which all life in the church flowed” (Boys 1989, 93).

Jungmann contended that the unity of God’s plan in the biblical narrative of the history of salvation provided the “unchanging background and fixed framework for the multifarious searchings and struggles that pass across the stage of life” (1967, 17). Religious educator Michael Horan observes that Hofinger and Jungmann argued for a Christian theology of revelation grounded in a biblical-historical narrative and distinct from systematic catechesis. However, the overall kerygmatic schema of initiation into the Mystery of Christ was not limited to historical narrative but included four means: bible, liturgy, doctrine and the Christian life. Horan explains, “Although it functions as one of the four [means of introduction to Christian revelation], “Christian life” is at the base of the ways of initiation into the mystery of Christ” (1989, 110).

The liturgical and kerygmatic movements found a common platform in the National Conference, the Liturgy Program at Notre Dame and in the pages of *Orate Fratres/Worship*. The roots of kerygmatic movement were similarly grounded in the liturgy and Hofinger taught that “the contemporary nature of the history of salvation is engagingly communicated in the liturgy” (1989, 120). In his view, the fullness of the liturgical cycle brings forth the unity of the Christian message and active participation in the liturgy points to “an essential element in religious pedagogy: the bringing into relief of the principles of experience and activity” (1955, 249). In his classic, *The Art of*

*Teaching Christian Doctrine*, Hofinger describes how the liturgy educates through pedagogy of “doing” and the experiential dimension of ritual action. He says:

The abstract truths of our religion become visible in the liturgy. This is what we stress so much in modern catechetics, but the liturgy does more than just make the truths visible; religion is more than just “knowing”, it is a “doing”. Therefore we have to learn by doing. Liturgy is an action, and the more we participate in this action of the family of Christ, the more our religion becomes active and pertinent (1957, 132).

Despite the common grounding of the two movements in the conviction that “the liturgy is the summit towards which the activity of the Church is directed” (SC #10), the salvation history model was criticized on numerous fronts. Biblical scholars took objection to its relegating the role of the Old Testament and Judaism to a preparatory function in Christianity (Boys 1981). Gabriel Moran argued the Catholic belief in the risen Christ must mean that revelation continues to happen, “The Church is not primarily of the historical Christ...She is rather the present sign and partial fulfillment of the present revelatory-redemptive process” (1966, 117). A group of religious education leaders known as the Catechetical Forum (which included Moran and Ryan) argued for the relation of biblical narrative to catechesis from more personalist and existential categories. They write:

[Freedom towards] the full development of persons in society with the freedom to love as Christ loves [by] taking account and reflecting on [revelation] that has been done in the past as the new needs and possibilities for reflecting in the present and the future are opened up by new human thought patterns, new human questions, vocabularies, cultures, etc (Moran et al., 1967, 1972).

What the critics of the kerygmatic approach objected to was not the power of the proclaimed word (kerygma) rather that the word demands genuine, historical manifestation. Implicit in this criticism, and crucial to the rise of contemporary narrative theology, is the notion of a radical personal participation in the word. Salvation history as an ahistorical narrative risks “letting nature and the body be untouched by God proclaimed in the Word” (Tracy 2002, 215). Conversely, the liturgy, by focusing on the sacramental nature of all reality, embodies the word in symbol and ritual to disclose that the events which constitute God’s history are also our own history.

### ***Liturgical Reform and Narrative Theology: Implicit Links***

This analysis of the early liturgical movement in America as an nascent expression of Christian narrative theology enacted through ritual recognizes that the emergence of story theology did not find an explicit theological context until the early 1960’s, “The reforms of the Second Vatican Council (1962 – 65) were the occasion for a new freedom in theological work...when it became clear that terms other than St. Thomas’ might be used to express the faith [and] Catholic theologians found themselves free to explore new ways to think of and to represent the faith of the Church” (Tilley 1990, 19). This new freedom in theological work that came to the fore during the Council was greatly influenced by the pastoral orientation of the liturgical renewal. In

this way, the call of the liturgical movement for full, conscious and active participation in the liturgy became foundational to the overall goal of the Council as the active participation of the People of God in the life and mission of Christ and of the Church.

The reforms to the liturgy addressed by the Council (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*) reflect the work of the liturgical movement in its promotion of the restoration of the liturgy itself that could facilitate instruction for active participation, “In this restoration, both texts and rites should be drawn up so that they express more clearly the holy things which they signify; the Christian people, so far as possible, should be enabled to understand them with ease and take part in them fully, actively as benefits a community” (SC #21). The renewed emphasis on sacred scripture (a core contribution of the kerygmatic renewal) was considered by the Council as critical to achieving a liturgical restoration, for “it is from Scripture that actions and signs derive their meaning” (SC #24).

Tilley observes that the emergence of story theology occurred at the intersection of multiple movements that set the stage for a general resurgence of interest in myth and myth making over the last forty years. The influence of the liturgical and kerygmatic reforms to the foundational theologies of revelation, scripture and liturgy are suggested. He summarizes:

The churches and churches’ [foundational] theologies have been shaken up. Critical philosophers have challenged believers to think through their faith and hinted at the centrality of narrative. The powerful arguments that sustain the the claim that human experience is intrinsically durational in form have shown the need for narratives to report that experience. Biblical scholars have retrieved the centrality of the parables for the teaching of Jesus. Through the experience of the horrors of twentieth century wars and the critical arguments of various scholars, the myths of modernity have been unmasked (1990, 36).

The founders of the liturgical movement first in Europe and later in America taught that to be a disciple of Christ was to be a member of his body. The body of Christ theology that underpinned the liturgical renewal professed the power of ritualized liturgy for making Christ’s story one’s own story in Christian community through a ritual enactment embodied in signs, symbols and gestures.

Among the many liturgical ideas taught by European reformers that would greatly influence the contours of the American revival was the conviction that active participation in the liturgy, while primarily ceremonial and aesthetic in practice, was informed and enhanced by intelligence and understanding. A second argument was the idea that ritual formation in the body of Christ did not have the creation of the particular community as its exclusive end, “Ritual was not an anachronistic practice without application to contemporary concerns; it was a means towards the renewal and unification within the Church and the larger society” (Torevell 2000, 121). Nineteenth century liturgical reformer Dom Pierre Gueranger believed the two were integrally related in that what would restore a sense of community was a comprehension of the liturgy, “It [the liturgy] can heal and save the world, but only on the condition that it be understood” (Franklin 1976, 156).

Tilley describes the liturgical sacrament central to the Christian life – the ritual of the Eucharist – as enacted metaphor (1990, 4). Just as the Christian narrative uses story

to explore the meaning of metaphor for one's life, ritual participation discovers the root Christian metaphors in symbolic objects, words, gestures and movements. In this shaping of shared meaning through ritual, American liturgical leaders called for an intelligible (conscious) participation rather than the liturgy as a static transmission of the faith tradition. The symbolic language of the liturgy required both that the meaning of the symbol not be arbitrary but also that it not be closed to new interpretation. As Fornas writes;

Symbols acquire life by the tension between their formal logic and their pointing at something else. No symbolic mode is totally closed or autonomous. It is woven into the tonality of human *praxis*, and its relative, systematic independence is a tendency and the goal of a process rather than its starting point (1995, 187).

### ***Summary***

The liturgical renewal of the twentieth century was above all a pastoral reorientation to Christian propositional theology that sought to make the Christian religious tradition more vibrant through the rediscovery of Christian ritual for forming, informing and transforming the Christian life. Just as Jesus used the parable to tell the story of the Kingdom as a story of reversal, and challenged the hearer to put together the impossible and the contradictory (Perrin 1976, 177-179), the Christian story enacted in ritual and communicated through sign and symbol functions to empower the imagination and action of the Christian. Christian ritual performs a conserving and constructive role. As an embodied form of Christian narrative theology, a fully conscious and active participation in the liturgy “attempts not only to retrieve the stories of Jesus and his followers, but also to replicate a central aspect of his method: a challenge to notice what has been hidden, to see things in light of a kingdom not of this world, and to reshape one's story in hope” (Tilley 1990, 218).

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