

Extravagant Affections, by Susan A. Ross

reviewed by [Martha Ellen Stortz](#) in the [June 2, 1999](#) issue

Extravagant Affections: A Feminist Sacramental Theology.

By Susan A. Ross. Continuum, 240 pp.

A priest poses the question to a group of children: "How many sacraments are there?" Without missing a beat a little girl responds: "Seven for boys, and six for girls." The math may differ for different communions, with fewer sacraments distributed more equitably among the genders, but Susan A. Ross of Loyola University raises questions that no sacramental tradition can ignore. She posits a principle all traditions could embrace: all of life is potentially revelatory of the divine. Then Ross surveys all facets of her question: how can one construct a sacramental theology that takes the bodies of men and women as seriously as it takes the body of Christ?

Those seeking a brief on women's ordination or a primer on feminist liturgical practice should look elsewhere. Ross leaves these important issues for other writers. She begins not with "women's experience," ritual or otherwise, but by probing the heart of Christian sacramentality.

As a feminist Ross finds deep resonance between feminist theology and emphases in sacramental theology on the goodness of the body and creation, the community, and the orienting significance of the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Yet as a feminist she also questions the way traditional sacramental theology regards bodies, communities and Christology. All sacramentality, "even a feminist interpretation of it," is inherently ambiguous. As Ross traces the metaphysical, expressive and moral dimensions of this ambiguity, she laments a contemporary loss of symbolic competence. Ironically, to the degree that feminist theology has settled for merely replacing masculine metaphors for the divine with feminine ones, it has contributed to this loss. Ross eschews the "add women and stir" solution, which served as a quick fix to both language about the divine and liturgical celebration. How might an appreciation of the very different ways in which men and women use language and symbol be appropriated in sacramental theology?

The second part of the book presents Ross's constructive position. A fascinating section surveys the rich spectrum of metaphors the Vatican II document *Lumen Gentium* used to describe the church: spouse, mother, sheepfold, people of God, building of God. With the rise of the women's movement and calls for the ordination of women, however, the range of metaphors narrowed. In response, ecclesial documents increasingly referred to "spouse" as the dominant metaphor for the church: functioning *in persona christi* the priest must be a male. Ross proposes "family" as an alternative metaphor to describe the church in the world. She readily acknowledges the limitation of this metaphor, but invites readers to explore its possibilities for revisioning body, symbol and ethics. Approached from a familial perspective, embodiment features interdependence, responsibility and dynamism. Ross draws on feminist psychoanalysis and psycholinguistics to orient sacramental theology in this familial matrix. Finally, she uses the family metaphor to bridge the lamentable gap between liturgy and ethics. An ecclesial ethic of the family stretches caring beyond biological and sociocultural limitations into the public realm.

The book is rich both in its constructive proposals and in the conversations Ross conducts with Protestant and Roman Catholic scholars of sacramental and liturgical theology, ritual theory, psychoanalysis, ethics and moral theology.

In the midst of the book's welcome attention to the body, particularly the bodies of women and children, one body remains elusive: the body of Christ. Ross focuses on "sacramental life" rather than individual sacraments. Yet this preference for sacramentality raises the issue of what the individual sacraments are for. How do sacraments differ from "sacramental moments"? How does one distinguish them from epiphanies of sheer grace which come unbidden, whether one is washing clothes or ministering at the deathbed of a loved one? Surely these sacramental moments rightly remind us that all of life can reveal the divine.

But sacraments are something else. These ritual acts shape and locate community and train the affections. Participation in the sacraments gradually allows us to discern the sacred. We have been placed in a world that is "charged with the grandeur of God," as Gerard Manley Hopkins put it, but it is littered with landmines as well. Sacraments help us navigate a dangerous landscape. They attract us with their beauty, even as our understanding falters and our practice remains imperfect.