



*Doing History as  
“Sacramental Remembrance”*

Keynote Address by:

Suzanne Noffke, OP



The McGreal Center for  
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The air was tense in Jerusalem in the spring of 1967, as I was completing a year of dissertation work there. On April 7, Israel had responded to intensive shelling from Syria by shooting down several of Syria's MiGs; Egypt was threatening to expel U.N. peacekeepers, and would actually do it on May 16. No one could know that we were on the brink of what would come to be known as the Six Day War, but everyone was expecting the worst. In late April, through a program that matched local Jewish families with interested visitors, I found myself at the Seder table of the Shacharyas.

The gathered family was attentive as Mr. Shacharya held up the matzah and began the ritual recounting of the Passover and exodus story. On and on he went, through responses to the questions posed by his youngest grandson, through story and song and rabbinic commentary, and eventually into the solemn conclusion:

*In every generation we are obligated to regard ourselves as if we had come out from Egypt, as it is said: "You shall tell your child on that day: It is because of what the Lord did for me when I left Egypt...." The Holy One ... redeemed not only our ancestors from Egypt, but redeemed us, too, as it is said [he put aside the matzah and raised the cup]: "We are the ones God brought out from there...." God took us from slavery to freedom, from sorrow to joy, from mourning to festivity, from deep darkness to great light, from bondage to redemption. So let us sing Hallelujah! Praise God!*

The bearded grandfather had been sitting like a sober-faced icon through it all, but at this point he suddenly got to his feet and slammed his fist on the table in obvious rage. "God did *not* redeem us in Auschwitz!" he shouted, fist slamming onto the table again. "God did *not* save us from the Holocaust! God is *not doing anything* to save us now! Why should I praise God?"

The old man had been *living* the story his son-in-law had been recounting. He was *there* in the midst of the first Passover and exodus. This was for him and for all around that table so much more than a story retold century after century. They were *there*. He was *there*—and *he* was *not* being delivered!



All of us in this room spend much of our time with stories—gathering and preserving the documents and artifacts which embody the stories, or pulling together the narrations which will bring the stories to life for others. We are all familiar with many ways of remembering and recounting the past.

- As archivists and historians we think perhaps first of history books and documentaries, the presentation and interpretation of individuals and societies and events, of cause and effect and consequence—and our expectations of scrupulous fidelity to fact in these works.
- Some of us have experienced the very personal research and recounting and evocation of memories involved in delving into family history—and how difficult it can be to sift the facts from Grandma's or Uncle Joe's recollections.
- We've all been party to the reminiscence and story-telling that so readily happens when we celebrate birthdays and anniversaries,
- or the easy embroidering and embellishing of simple fact which accompanies our journeys into nostalgia....

But none of these describes what was happening around that Seider table in 1967 Jerusalem. That was rooted in a long, long tradition of remembering and recounting born explicitly of *faith*. It was a sacred ritual remembrance, as is every Passover celebration to this day.

My contention today is that this sacred, even sacramental, remembrance is at the heart of our work as archivists and historians into whose keeping our religious congregations' past has been entrusted for preservation and sharing.

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Let me expand for a moment on my use of the word "sacramental" here. As Catholics, most of us here grew up with clear catechism definitions of seven sacraments and a multitude of "sacramentals"—objects or actions explicitly "blessed" by the church. (For example, a rosary wasn't a "sacramental" until a priest had blessed it.) The renewal of sacramental theology which accompanied and followed the Second Vatican



Council, however, has helped us to reclaim the far broader notion of sacramentality found in early Christian theology. To the eye of faith, especially within the mystery of the incarnation, *all* is revelatory of God, *all* is graced, *all* is sacred. Anything and everything can be a vehicle of grace, an encounter with God and an invitation to respond. Anything and everything can in this broader sense be “sacramental,” though this graced sacredness is crystallized and focused, as it were, in the seven very specifically defined sacraments we celebrate within the church community.

Within the Judeo-Christian tradition then, all history is *essentially* sacred history, “salvation history,” the revelation of God at work in the world in compassionate and saving love. This God of history is not a controlling God, nor even simply a power-wielding God, but a concerned and saving God. To remember the events of that history in the sense my Passover story illustrates is to enter into salvation, to be open to being saved and to know the possibility of being saved—or not saved. It is a sacred, sacramental, remembrance.

In the language of day-to-day life, the Hebrew verb זָכַר (*zachar*), like its common English equivalent “remember,” *can* signify simple recall—“Yes, I remember that!” “I can’t remember your name!” Or it can signify something more relational—“Thanks for remembering me on my birthday!” But in the theological and ritual language of Judaism it came to mean “remembering within the eternal present of God.” And so to ritually remember the Passover and exodus in faith in the Seder is to enter into those events within God’s eternal present. Differences of time and space disappear, and the community experiences those events so intimately that their individual and communal present and future are impacted. Everything—past, present and future—*is* in fact eternally present to and in God, independent of time and space; so if we enter into any reality as it is before God and within God, we are in fact present to it and it to us. And to the extent that we are receptive to that reality, to the extent that we do “enter into it,” it has power to form and transform us as we live our present into our future.



Let me give just a few examples.

- The people are admonished in the book of Deuteronomy: "Remember the Lord your God, who...confirms the covenant sworn to your ancestors, *as it is today.*"<sup>1</sup> And again and again throughout the scriptures we are told that God "remembers" this covenant.
- Individuals and the whole people are instructed to erect "memorials" and to offer "memorials" of incense which will bring them "*forever*" into the experience of specific saving events of their history—as the stones Joshua has his men pile up in memory of the crossing of the Jordan.<sup>2</sup>
- Many Jews today wear a pin or pendant with the simple word זכר (*z'chor*), "Remember." What is being "remembered" is the Holocaust—again not simply "recalled," but carried in God's eternal present so that it may always be kept in perspective and this tragic history may never be repeated.

It is of course not surprising that this interpretation of remembrance has carried over into Christian theology and ritual. Jesus and his disciples were, after all, Jews. The word used in the Greek New Testament is ἀνάμνησις (*anamnesis*)—literally, "non-loss of memory."<sup>3</sup> As in the theological and ritual use of the Hebrew זכר, however, this is not simply "not failing to recall," but "remembering within the eternal present of God." The gospel of Matthew depicts Jesus as saying, "I came not to abolish the law and the prophets (two of the three major divisions of the Hebrew scriptures, *Torah* and *Nevi'im*) but to fulfill them."<sup>4</sup>

Eucharist, "the source and summit of the Christian life,"<sup>5</sup> is of course in a direct line with the celebration of Passover. It has come to be called *eucharist*, "thanksgiving," because the synoptic gospels and Paul's First

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1 Dt 8, 18.

2 Jos 4, 7.

3 Think of *amnesia*, "loss of memory," with the Greek negative prefix *an-*.

4 Mt 5, 17. The third division of the Hebrew scriptures (*Tanach*) is *Ketuvim*, "Writings."

5 *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy* (Vatican II), I, 10.



Letter to the Corinthians<sup>6</sup> tell us that Jesus “blessed” and “gave thanks”—both attitudes he would have expressed within the Passover ritual. But the larger context is *remembrance, anamnesis*.<sup>7</sup> The celebration of Passover is a ritual remembrance of the original Passover-exodus event; Jesus, as he leads his disciples in that celebration on the night before his death, gives the ritual his own unique interpretation and (in the accounts of Paul and Luke) tells his disciples to reenact that interpretation “in remembrance” of him.

Over the ages many have, whether in mockery or in misunderstanding, seen the Christian eucharistic ritual as some sort of magic or “hocus pocus”—the latter expression actually derisively concocted from the Latin *Hoc est corpus* (“This is [my] body”). Yet neither Jesus’ action nor our ritual remembrance of it is magic. Both are quite simply and profoundly the living out of sacred/sacramental remembrance. Jesus in this moment, sensing his imminent fate and its import in relation to the past and into the future, seems to see a coming together of his own self-offering, his *kenosis*,<sup>8</sup> with the exodus mystery and the Passover meal. And so he takes the Passover bread and then the wine and declares not, as the disciples would have expected, “This is the bread of affliction which our ancestors ate...,” but, “This is *my body*....” And then, “This is *my blood*....” And just as he perceives this identification within the eternal present of God, he asks his disciples to do the same, to remember him and his surrendered life in faith, in bread and wine, in a paschal sacrament, within God’s eternal present, and so to be intimately part of it and impacted by it into their future.

At that Seder meal in Jerusalem in 1967, Mr. Shacharya had proclaimed, “In every generation we are obligated to regard ourselves as if *we* had come out from Egypt,” and his father-in-law had angrily protested that *he* hadn’t experienced deliverance in the past and wasn’t experiencing it now, either in this celebration or in the political realities of that spring. Did the disciples feel a similar sense of protest or at least wonderment at Jesus’

6 Mk 14, 22–24; Mt 26, 26–28; Lk 22, 17–20; 1 Cor 10, 16; 11, 23–26.

7 The Aramaic דוכרן (*dochron*, “remembrance”) is a translation rather than a direct cognate of the Hebrew זכר.

8 κένωσις, “emptying,” as in Phil 2, 7.



so directly identifying himself with the symbols of God's saving power, but in language which portended sacrifice rather than any continuation of the previous Sunday's triumph? What sort of deliverance was this?

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But what does all of this have to do with us as archivists and historians?

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Ultimately, there is only one way for a Jew or a Christian to consider or recount history—within the eternal present of the God of history, in a sense not identical but yet analogous to the sacred/sacramental remembrance of which I've been speaking.

We preserve documents and artifacts, and display them—but why? We tell and write the stories of our past—but why? Is it simply to celebrate all that we have been? Or to ensure that our story will not be lost to future generations? Or to take ourselves and others on nostalgia trips? Yes, our archives and our history accounts do all of this. But they *can* and *must* do more. And that "more" has probably never been more urgent than at this moment in our history.

For all of us here, but especially for apostolic women religious in North America and western Europe, this is a moment of unique significance.

- For a number of years now, as we've watched our increasing age and declining numbers, most of us have journeyed from denial to somewhere on a continuum of optimism-pessimism-realism. Are we as congregations dying or are we on the threshold of new (and perhaps very different) life? Is this bad or good? Tragic or exciting?
- We who used to occupy a pedestal of honor and deference in the eyes of both clerics and laity find ourselves the focus of controversy and even suspicion within our church. We whose word was (often unrealistically) regarded as incontestable truth are now the object of official investigations.
- For decades our ministry in schools, hospitals, and other very visible institutions was fiscally as well as physically, intellectually and spiritually a recognized gift, staffed from a seemingly unlimited supply of sisters.



Now we minister far more anonymously, nearly always and everywhere starved for sufficient staff to do all we dream of doing.

What is going on, and what has it to do with the work of archivists and historians? Many folks are in fact content with finding nostalgic relief and a glow of past glory in what we have to offer. But if we are indeed called to remember *in faith*, then we can say that we are indeed called to a kind of “sacramental remembrance” of the present mystery of God’s grace enfleshed in our lives and in our congregational histories. And in that case, our role is far more profound in its relevance to our present and future as religious than we might have imagined.

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After Jesus had identified the Passover bread and wine as his own body and blood, he offered each to his disciples, telling them, “This is *for you... and for the many...*” Even as the disciples were immersed in and experiencing their Jewish past within God’s eternal present through the Passover ritual, he was taking the symbols of their past and proclaiming a new meaning for *them* in these symbols, for that moment and into the future. And he asked them—no, *commanded* them—to do the same “in remembrance” of him every time they would gather in sacred ritual around the bread and wine. We still carry out that command day after day at our altars as the Christian community celebrates through word and table this sacramental remembrance of God’s and Christ’s saving action through history. In and through our eucharistic liturgy we enter into that saving action as *present*, as impacting and giving meaning *now* to our present and our future.

But there are other symbols of God’s past action in the world—among them, the documents and artifacts and stories which embody the history of God’s saving action within and through each of our congregations, within and through the Order of Preachers as a whole and in all its parts. We as archivists and historians have been entrusted with these symbols, to preserve and share them for the common good.

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We may think that, at least in our role as archivists and historians, we don’t have to be burdened with the challenges that characterize the



present moment for apostolic religious in North America and western Europe. Let those in leadership and vocation and membership ministry worry about demographics! Let those in leadership and pastoral and theological ministry worry about our place in the church and our relations with church authorities! Let those in education and healthcare and social justice ministries worry about sustaining our service in the world! We archivists and historians can relax in the knowledge that at least the past is *past*, and the challenges of the past were someone else's challenge and concern.

But if it is true that, for us, all history is *essentially* salvation history, and if our vocation as archivists and historians is therefore not just preservation and recalling and recounting but a truly sacred form of remembering in faith, in an eternal present, then it is our responsibility to unearth and expose and communicate the *meaning* of the documents and artifacts and stories of our past *within that perspective*, and to lead our communities in entering into that meaning, celebrating it, and discovering how it wants to form and transform us *now*, to shape our present into our future.

What might happen if we as archivists and historians were consciously to approach every document and artifact and story as it is within the eternal present of God, and there probe within each its meaning for this moment and for the future? This is the beginning of doing history as sacramental remembrance. But we do not do it alone. As in the ritual remembrance of Passover and Jesus' last supper, and in the sacramental remembrance of eucharist, there is a *community* to be brought into the act. We are commissioned to take these symbols of God's saving action and to find ways of communicating to our communities that "*this is for you... and for the many...*"

What might happen if we were to lead our communities in this sort of sacred remembrance of the demographic patterns of our past —

- foundation days, when the dream of one or two or three began to shape and be shaped by something new and as yet unknown and unknowable;
- years when extreme poverty or waves of illness and death threatened the extinction of the community;



- the heyday of the 1950s, when young (often very young) new applicants swelled our numbers and in some cases drove us to build new and bigger motherhouses for the influx we believed was yet to come?

What might happen if we were to lead our communities in this sort of remembrance of these pieces of our past, and *there*, within the eternal present of God, ponder the meaning of *today's* changing demographics?

What might happen if we were to lead our communities in this sort of sacred remembrance of the mid- to late 19th century, when bishops were questioning whether the new apostolic communities being born around North America and Europe could possibly be considered “religious” or even legitimate, because they were not enclosed in monasteries? What might happen if we were to engage our sisters and brothers in this sort of remembrance of tense relations of past community leaders—including often our founders—with church authority? Or past ecclesiastical scrutiny and questioning of how we were conducting our institutions, of where and how individual members were ministering?

What might happen if we were to lead our communities in this sort of sacred remembrance of how our sisters and brothers throughout our history organized and directed their ministries —

- how their efforts to maintain “separation from the world” affected their ministry;
- the disadvantages *and* the benefits of every member's availability to be assigned to congregationally chosen ministries;
- the consequences of assuming that anyone with a modicum of intelligence and good will could fill any role to which obedience assigned him or her?

Could consideration of these in God's eternal present in any way enlighten our ministerial situation and decisions today?

What might happen if we were to lead our communities in this sort of sacred remembrance of a time when only bishops and their delegates could preach, and clerics were circumscribed either by diocese or by monastery, and Dominic and Francis became convinced that an entirely



new way of religious life and preaching was needed? Or a time when apostolic religious life for women did not exist, and new needs in the world tugged at the hearts of monastics and laywomen alike to "do a new thing," a new thing very unlike any structured and approved reality within the church, a new thing whose form they could barely imagine, and whose eventual form would be quite different from anything they *might* have imagined?

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"In every generation we are obligated to regard ourselves as if we had come out from Egypt...."

The grandfather's outburst at that 1967 Seder meal forced him and his entire family to deal with his very present experience and denial as well as the faith they had assumed in their celebration. Was their dealing with the Six Day War a few weeks later any different for that?

Jesus on that night before he died saw the meaning of his own life and death, meaning for his own and his people's future, opened up in the symbols of his Jewish past, the bread and wine of that Passover ritual. "This is *my body*.... This is *my blood*—given for you and for the many...." But, as we've seen, he didn't stop there. As the community of his disciples received the bread and the wine with his declaration of this new meaning, he brought them into the action and the responsibility, for that night and into the future: "Whenever *you* do this, do it in remembrance of me." And so God's past saving action and Jesus' own saving action were to shape every *present* and *future* moment and imbue it with new meaning—for each person there and for "the many," for the world. The disciples must have left that Passover meal personally shaken for sure, but also with a new and weighty sense of responsibility.

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And we?

If nothing new happens *after* our sacramental remembering in eucharist, we might well ask what really happened—at least within *us*—*during* the celebration. If nothing new happens in our communities because of our preserving and recalling and recounting our history, we might ask ourselves whether we are yet fully meeting our responsibility as



archivists and historians. And our responsibility, I contend, is this: We have been commissioned to lead our sisters and brothers to confront more openly and efficaciously the meaning of our *present* and *future* through a sacred remembrance of our *past* within the eternal *present* of the God of history—the God of *our* history embodied in the documents and artifacts and stories entrusted to our keeping.

How shall we measure up to such a challenge? What will be “our gift for the 21st century”?





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