

The Catholic Sacramental Imagination and the Access/Excess of Grace

Anthony J. Godzieba

In this article Anthony J. Godzieba explores various ways the Catholic imagination enables us to hear what the sacraments have to say directly to us.

In order to recognize what they are saying, we must be like artists, attuned to realities beyond the surface of our experience.

What better way to begin a discussion of the Catholic sacramental imagination than with a nod to images?

The art historian and cultural theorist W.J.T. Mitchell has famously and provocatively asked, “What do pictures want?” (Mitchell 1996, 2005). One answer, it turns out, is that they want “not to be interpreted, decoded, worshiped, smashed, exposed, or demystified by their beholders, or to enthrall their beholders” (Mitchell 2005, 48). In other words, they do not want to be reduced to texts and analyzed like them. Mitchell concedes that semiotic, hermeneutic, and rhetorical methods provide some help in disclosing the meaning of images. But, he asks, is the “meaning” the most fundamental thing that matters when we encounter a picture? We create a problem when we merely use some literary or political hermeneutic to “decode” images and thereby discover the desires of their producers and consumers, the intentions that lurk in the background and foreground of these pictures. By treating pictures as signs and symbols that *need* decoding, we end up ignoring the images themselves and focus more on those behind-the-scenes intentions that

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are considered to be the “real” meaning. The images themselves are betrayed. The alternative, Mitchell suggests, is to emphasize the “pictorial turn” rather than the “linguistic turn.” I take this to mean the need for a more *performative* approach: to allow ourselves to be in the presence of pictures *as pictures* rather than as tokens, to encounter their richness as images and be invited and provoked (and seduced, quizzed, entertained, and so on) by them as we experience an active relationship with them. We need to focus on the images themselves—from icons to propaganda, from ads to art, from photo-realism to the most abstract images—and simply ask them what they desire from us, which may indeed be different from what pictures “mean.”

Sacraments and Pictures

It is fair and even appropriate, I think, to ask a very similar question of sacraments and sacramentality, namely, “What do sacraments want?” And what they desire is an encounter with us on the material terms they share with us. They want to provoke us into a response that acknowledges and experiences their materiality, but also much more: the richness and indeed the plenitude that their materiality makes accessible—the grace of God, the presence of God, the participation in divine life that is simply given to us on account of God’s love. But where sacraments and sacramentality differ from images is precisely this “much more.” In spite of the power that images are said to have in contemporary consumer culture, Mitchell argues that pictures “may be a lot weaker than we think” (Mitchell 2005, 36). In fact, the desire of images is sparked by their need, their emptiness, by what they lack:

Above all they would want a kind of mastery over the beholder. . . . The paintings’ desire, in short, is to change places with the beholder, to transfix or paralyze the beholder, turning him or her into an image for the gaze of the picture in which might be called “the Medusa effect. . . .” The power they want is manifested as *lack*, not as possession. (Mitchell 2005, 37)

Sacraments and sacramentality, on the other hand, bespeak presence, gift, and fullness of grace running over. They desire to give from their plenitude. Surely they “need” us to actualize their potential here and now, which is why perhaps it is best to interpret the sacraments’ effects in terms of a theological aesthetics. They are ritual *performances* that engage us personally, invite us into the depth of their “world,” and transform us by effecting what they signify. This is also why sacramental theology’s traditional emphasis on the “required dispositions” of the recipient is crucial. But what is absolutely central is the recognition that in the action that is sacramentality, God makes the first move. The traditional theology

of *ex opere operato* acts as a valuable reminder of this by insisting on God's eternal covenantal faithfulness to humanity as the motivating force of sacramentality that overcomes any ministerial deficiency. God's unshakable and inexhaustible gift of divine life as manifested is the foundation of sacramental life.

The necessary precondition that allows us to recognize and actualize this invitation to participation in divine life is the sacramental imagination. The Catholic sacramental imagination is easy to describe. It is the way of envisioning reality through the eyes of faith that recognizes that the finite can indeed mediate the infinite, that all aspects of created being can mediate grace. One might summarize it simply by invoking Ignatius of Loyola's famous dictum "to seek God our Lord in all things" (Ganss et al., 292). Or one might employ David Tracy's phrase "the analogical imagination" to describe the sacramental imagination's simultaneously *kataphatic* and *apophatic* insight that the world and history both conceal and reveal the presence of God (Tracy, 405–45). Or one might call on one of Thomas Aquinas's central assertions regarding the relation of faith to reason and nature to grace:

From effects evident to us . . . we can demonstrate what in itself is not evident to us, namely, that God exists. . . . For faith presupposes natural knowledge, just as grace does nature and all perfections that which they perfect. . . . God's effects, therefore, can serve to demonstrate that God exists, even though they cannot help us to know him comprehensively for what he is. (*Summa Theologiae* [ST] Ia, q. 2, a. 2 [Thomas Aquinas, 2:11])

What is common to these assertions is the presupposition that I would term "the Catholic construal of reality," the belief in the sacramentality of creation—that materiality and history together are the means by which God has chosen to reveal God's self. The very name "sacramental imagination" takes its meaning from and extends the basic Catholic definition of sacrament. Look either to the definition of the Council of Trent ("‘A Sacrament,’ [Augustine] says, ‘is a sign of a sacred thing’; or, as it has been expressed in other words of the same import [by Bernard of Clairvaux]: ‘A Sacrament is a visible sign of an invisible grace, instituted for our justification’" [*Catechism of the Council of Trent*, 143]) or to that given in the most recent *Catechism of the Catholic Church* ("The sacraments are efficacious signs of grace, instituted by Christ and entrusted to the Church, by which divine life is dispensed to us. The visible rites by which the sacraments are celebrated signify and make present the graces proper to each sacrament" [*Catechism*, no. 1131]): It is clear that the key to understanding sacramentality is *mediation*. The crucial claim is that material "stuff" has the potential to be a channel of grace, that creation necessarily mediates the presence of God that enables our participation in divine life, on God's initiative.

Easy to describe, then: the sacramental imagination allows us to recognize transcendence in immanence. But it is harder to give an account of its operations

and articulate its richness, harder still to lay out its implications. This is due partly to its range of interest, namely *all* of reality. What Thomas says of theology as *sacra doctrina*—that its task is to speak of everything—applies equally to the sacramental imagination: it deals “with God as principal (*principaliter*)” and with “creatures in relation to him, who is their origin and end” (*ST* Ia, q.1, a. 3, ad 1; Thomas Aquinas, 2:14–15). The difficulty is also due to the inherent mystery to which the sacramental imagination responds: the fundamental graced nature of created being as a mediation of divine presence, affirmed in Genesis 1–2; the intensification of this mediation in the incarnation of Christ; and its confirmation in Christ’s resurrection. Created reality’s sacramental depth, seen by the eyes of faith, is not “provable” in any strictly objective sense. Indeed, at times its presence is to the point of ambiguity. This is because the mystery is grounded in God’s own ineffability, what Christian Duquoc has called God’s “discretion”—the fact that God evades our direct experience, that God is not an object of our knowledge in the way that other objects are (Duquoc, 3). But just as there are natural, rational, and aesthetic pointers to God’s existence (as both the psalmist in Psalms 8 and 19 and Thomas in the *Summa* were well aware), so too there are pointers to the sacramentality of reality, and it is the task of theology to articulate them. Lastly, the difficulty is due to the fact that sacramentality is both the *structure* of creation and a *process*, our active encounter with creation by which we relate to reality with every aspect of our being as made in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26–27). It is therefore not a thing to be defined or a text to be decoded, but rather a performance to be experienced, a praxis demanding our participation.

The sacramental imagination, then, is an act of faith in God and in creation—faith in God’s presence to us as well as our access to God, through creation’s mediation. Interpreting precisely *how* it grasps this “mediated immediacy” (Rahner, 83–84) would seem not only a difficult but a completely unwieldy task. However, especially today when the productive power of the imagination is constrained and even sapped by a labyrinth of images constructed by contemporary consumer and media cultures, it is theology’s crucial task to emphasize the fundamental human yearning for God’s presence, especially as it is revealed in the intentionality of the human imagination. To make our analysis productive as well as manageable, but also to do justice to the process of sacramentality, I want to examine the sacramental imagination from two angles. First, I want to present the power of the imagination as a way of thinking beyond the boundaries of the immediate, as a way of grasping the possible that lies beyond the ordinary, business-as-usual experiences

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that swamp our attention. Then, I want to tie the intentionality of the imagination, and more important the religious imagination, to a Catholic understanding of “natural theology,” and to the interrelated complex of Creation–Incarnation–Resurrection that grounds the sacramental imagination.

Imagination

Richard Kearney’s phenomenological analysis of the imagination provides an extremely valuable foundation on which we can build our own examination of the sacramental imagination. His analysis responds to the now-undisputed postmodern dismantling of the modern humanist imagination. Modernity assigned humanity an “almost messianic role” in the story of historical progress. Kearney persuasively argues that the postmodern critique of this anthropocentrism, while justified, does not mean that we should deny “the creative human subject any role whatsoever in the shaping of meaning.” To do so would run the risk of slipping into “a corrosive rhetoric of apocalyptic pessimism” or a paralyzing and impotent “cultural nihilism.” It would also ignore our ethical duty to respond to the “call of the other.” Our situation is already one of commodified imagery and “pseudoevents” where “reality appears to be a mere shadow” and “image and reality have dissolved into a play of mutual parody—to the point where we can no longer say which is which.” This situation calls for a new interpretation of imagination, one that will view the other not as a mirror image or a commodity, but as an image that has a referent: a particular person who demands a response from me, one “whose very *otherness* refuses to be reduced to an empty mimicry of *sameness*. Beyond the mask, there is a face” (Kearney 1987, 42–43).

Kearney provides a new interpretation of the imagination by means of a phenomenology of the image that results in two typologies. The first presents the characteristics of the Western imagination in terms of chronologically ordered paradigms. The *premodern* imagination is fundamentally theocentric and mimetic, mirroring reality and especially its divine source in an image that is essentially an act of creative *homage*. The Byzantine icon is a prime example. The *modern* imagination is anthropocentric and productive, more lamp than mirror, devoted to autonomous self-expression, crafting images that are always “a portrait of the artist.” The *postmodern* imagination is parodic and ec-centric, dethroning the theocentric and the anthropocentric by juxtaposing fragments of meaning that it has not created and turning image into reality (Kearney 1988, 1–18). The second typology deals with the operations of the contemporary imagination. Imagination is first of all called to be *critical*, in that it demystifies the ontotheological and humanist notions of “origin” and carefully discriminates between authentic and inauthentic aspects of the postmodern context. Second, and most important, the imagination is called to be *poetic* (in the sense of *poiësis*, “inventive”), challenging

the status quo of endless imitation by daring to invent new possibilities of existence that break free of the technological and ethical quagmire of the postmodern context. Kearney's definition is pivotal:

Renouncing the pervasive sense of social paralysis, the poetic imagination would attempt to restore man's faith in history and to nourish the belief that things can be changed. The first and most effective step in this direction is to begin to *imagine* that the world as it is could be *otherwise*. (Kearney 1987, 44)

Granted, certain aspects of Kearney's argument no longer hold up under closer scrutiny. His unilateral characterization of modernity in epistemological terms, for instance, hardly does justice to the complex interweavings of various *modernities* that characterize the period we normally call "modern" (i.e., roughly from 1450 to 1950). Recent analyses of both "modernity" and modern formulations of human agency and affect in such areas as modern philosophy, theology, spirituality, and the arts show that any reduction of "modernity" to a single characteristic (such as the Cartesian *cogito*, Newtonian mechanics, or Enlightenment rationality) is simply untenable. A crucial element often missing in treatments of "modernity" is the acknowledgment of the formative contributions of Catholic Counter-Reformation and Baroque spirituality (e.g., Ignatius of Loyola, Teresa of Avila, Francis de Sales) to the constitution of the modern "self." As for Kearney's characterization of the "critical" imagination, I would strongly advocate adding an insight derived from Johann Baptist Metz's theology of memory (Metz 2007) as well as from feminist theological hermeneutics (e.g., Schüssler Fiorenza 1984), that our critical imagination also performs the "backward glance" and is able to sort through history to discover what is retrievable for the present from an already sedimented past. Not all retrievals need to be thoroughly oppositional to the present in order to be emancipatory.

Despite these critiques, the formal outlines of Kearney's theory are still viable, and no aspect is more valuable than his theory of the "otherwise." How precisely does the poetic imagination "restore [our] faith in history" and "nourish the belief that things can be changed?" The poetic imagination is both a realistic response to contemporary situations and a direct probing of the new possibilities for existence that those situations present. Thinking otherwise asks, "What if . . .?" What if things were changed? What if the present were different? The poetic imagination is thus critical in its own right: it judges the status quo, the "business-as-usual" situation of the present as inadequate, not fulfilling enough to match our desires, indeed not humanizing enough. By thinking otherwise than the norm or the status quo, the poetic imagination reactivates historical consciousness and allows for the new, the unprecedented, the different, the unprepared-for to break into our consciousness. Historical consciousness—the recognition that the past is not same as the present, and the present is not the same as the future—threatens the status

quo by disclosing that the present is not absolute and that reality and life are not made up simply of repetition. The poetic imagination suggests a reconstrual or refiguration of reality that can act as a catalyst for change: to *think* otherwise (i.e., entertaining new possibilities that could be made real and appear to be within range of human happiness) can serve as a catalyst for acting otherwise (i.e., transformative praxis, the actualization of the possibilities, changing the situation for the better). “Thinking otherwise” beyond the status quo—thus, the retrieval of historical consciousness and of hope in transcendence—restores both a belief that the present is neither circular nor absolute, and a hope in newly imagined possibilities for a different and better future, a future that can exceed our abilities and expectations. *Thinking* otherwise is the catalyst for *acting* otherwise with the

confidence that the transformation promised by these new possibilities can be appropriated through action.

The “otherwise” is thus not “fantastic” in any trivial sense, but rather practices *poiësis* in a vitally important way. This is because the poetic imagination is *intentional* in two senses: as a realistic response to contemporary situations and as a direct probing of the new possibilities for existence that those situations present. This imagination is truly *aesthetic* in that its practice of inventing alternative figurations mirrors the fundamental workings of the artist. “Invention” here refers to the classical rhetorical tool of *inventio*, the most important tool of artistic genius until late eighteenth-century theories of aesthetics. *Inventio* was defined by Cicero as “discoveries,” and can be defined even more specifically as “a mechanism that triggers further elaborative thought” that explores all the possibilities of a

topic or example or figure in order to craft a work of art or musical composition (Dreyfus, 2–3). When this imaginative reconstrual is directly linked to our response to the other, who is neither mimetic image nor commodified object but rather a source of new possibilities, we have an “otherwise” with the power to reconfigure the present and look to the future, offering a way out of the prison-house of commodified consumer culture. It is clear, then, why Kearney insists that the “ethical scruple” that seems to obsess postmodern accounts of “otherness” is a non-negotiable structure of being-human, “that scruple of answerability to the other which cannot be dispelled in our Civilization of the Image” (Kearney 1991, 210).

The weakness in Kearney’s theory, however, is this: with what criteria is one to evaluate all the “otherwises” that are evoked by the poetic imagination? In other

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words, how are we to discriminate among the new possibilities for existence called forth by the imagination so that we might discern which are eventually productive and which are destructive, which are life-affirming and which are life-denying? A simple appeal to alterity and the “call of the other” is too thin to provide the criteria for discernment. In this situation religion plays a fundamental role, for the religions have always claimed to provide standards to judge a meaningful human life: in order to be fully human, one must be aware of humanity’s finitude and its rootedness in the divine. As Leszek Kolakowski puts it, “A religious world perception is indeed able to teach us *how to be a failure*. And the latent assumption behind such teaching is that on earth everybody is a failure” (Kolakowski 1982, 40). The religious worldview alone is realistic because it reminds us that the world and human experience have essential limits and achieve only degrees of perfection, never any totality or perfect fulfillment of our desires. “Religion is man’s way of accepting life as an inevitable defeat. That it is not an inevitable defeat is a claim that cannot be defended in good faith. . . . One can accept life, and accept it, at the same time, as a defeat only if one accepts that there is a sense [i.e., a meaning] beyond that which is inherent in human history—if, in other words, one accepts the order of the sacred” (Kolakowski 1990, 73). Religion’s crucial role in contemporary society is to recognize and actively disclose the “otherwise” that is the sacred, thereby revealing both the intrinsic limitations and inevitable lack of fulfillment of the profane, but also its dependence on the sacred for its own intentional thrust beyond its limitations for its fulfillment. The religions, then, can be seen as prime examples of the poetic imagination.

The Sacramental Imagination

Let me repeat here the basic definition of the sacramental imagination: it is the way of envisioning reality through the eyes of faith that recognizes that the finite can mediate the infinite, that all aspects of created being can mediate grace. The framework of the “otherwise” provides a way of bringing this Catholic commitment to the structure and process of sacramentality into direct conversation with contemporary culture and also with those who are suspicious of religious metanarratives.

Christian religious practices and beliefs are the believing community’s activation of its particular poetic imagination, the sacramental imagination, in response to the revelation of God. With this imagination, the community probes its immediate situation for new possibilities of existence in the light of God’s relationship with humankind and with the cosmos. Christianity’s “oppositional” or “interruptive” nature, animated by the revelation of God in Jesus Christ, announces that life *can* be otherwise than an unending cycle of desires and the commodified images that fulfill them, and that God *wills* that it be otherwise: an “otherwise” that is life-enhancing,

beginning in the present and fulfilled in the future. Such an active refiguration of the world toward eschatological fulfillment becomes meaningful for us within our act of faith in God—that is, by our imagining as possible the power of God to transform seemingly hopeless situations and by our belief in the suitability of the world to mediate such transformation. This is precisely the message of Jesus’ parables, in which all sorts of human relationships (e.g., a dysfunctional family in Luke 15:11-32, business relationships in Matt 18:21-35 and 20:1-16) are imagined “otherwise” as fitting vehicles for the reality of God’s salvific actions. The response of our imaginations to the revealed mystery of divine love is the first step toward hoping in and participating in its ongoing actualization. In other words, conversion to God implies putting into practice the values of the reign of God. Conversion is

the tuning of our “thinking otherwise” to the “otherwise” already incarnated in the life, message, and praxis of Jesus. On the basis of his death and resurrection, the memory of which “forms the basis of the promise of a freedom that will come for everyone” (Metz, 107), we anticipate this life-enhancing fulfillment as a direct reaction to our twin experiences of grace and finitude, love and our desire for more love, healing and the confession of our brokenness.

What I am suggesting here is a kind of “natural theology” that responds to and is fulfilled by God’s revelation of love and grace as the basic structure of reality. This is not “natural theology” in the textbook sense of “rational knowledge of God without special revelation,” but rather the deeply Catholic sense of a theology that seeks to demonstrate “the natural ‘access-point’ of faith” (Kasper 1980, 20) and “the internal reasonableness of a faith which has its substantiation in and

from itself” (Kasper 2005, 71). In other words, the believer claims that human experience by its very nature participates in a dynamic movement toward God that can be even more fully articulated through faith in God’s further self-revelation in and through created being—a claim that is at the heart of the sacramental imagination.

Is there a “natural access-point of faith” visible in the workings of the poetic imagination? If I demonstrate how our finite everydayness is open to transcendence by exceeding its limits, as a condition of its very structure, then I have a chance to render plausible, as far as it is possible, transcendence from “our side,” sketching out that “access-point” where the revelation of God meets the embodied self’s transcendental yearnings and intentional strivings for fulfillment. The intentional

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thrust outward into the world (a role enacted by the body) and into the future (by the imagination) function as analogues and indeed as the substrata for faith as intentionality, our uncontainable seeking for fulfillment in God. Our faith intentionality finds its counterpart in the intentional thrust “inward” and toward the future on God’s part, in revelation, at points of varying intensities. The peak revelational intensities of Creation, Incarnation, and Resurrection give the believer a glimpse at the divine poetic imagination, God’s “otherwise.” The sacramental imagination is founded upon and is our response to these peak revelational intensities. The Incarnation especially functions as the benchmark for our own imaginative “thinking otherwise.” It is the criterion that enables us to discern which “otherwises” are life-affirming and which are life-denying. In the earthly and the risen life of Jesus, we have God’s word on what that criterion is and how it is enacted. With the sacramental imagination, we recognize and participate in this revelatory gift, and the sacraments themselves are the prolongation and further specification of these peak revelational intensities in history. What sacraments “want,” then, is our transformation by means of these intensities, an effect that can occur only when we fulfill the most fundamental “desire” of the sacraments: that (having the required disposition) we participate.

The doctrine of Creation confirms the fundamental goodness of materiality and history: the world is the arena for the manifestation of God’s glory and saving power (cf. Psalms 8, 19). This claim is intensified by the Incarnation: particularity and presence are given revelational value. And Incarnation, the Word’s embodiment and God’s imaginative judgment as to the potential range of materiality, locates divine presence *somewhere*. The doctrine of the Incarnation holds “that the Trinitarian God assumed human reality in the person of the eternal Word who is the Father’s eternal self-expression, so that God, the Creator, could save humankind.” The doctrine contains a double reference, “both to the *act* by which the Word of God *assumes* human nature and to the *abiding state* that results from the Word’s having assumed human nature” (Müller, 377). This act of God is the necessary condition for this abiding state whereby humanity, precisely in its embodied subjectivity, is deemed a fitting locus for God’s revelation. This self-revelation of God, occurring as it does within a particular human life at a particular place and time, also indicates God’s positive judgment on the suitability of created being and of the particularity of its historical situatedness for the mediation of divine love and salvation. The “abiding state” that results from the divine initiative and the effects this has on our contemporary experience allow us to claim, in the strongest terms, that “the world in its historicity and materiality does not separate us from God,

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but binds us to God. In the incarnation, creation in its openness and receptivity to God . . . becomes a basic means of grace for humankind” (Müller, 379).

The Incarnation thus opens up the materiality of the particular as the arena of this receptivity. It impels us to think otherwise about materiality and the possibilities of the particular, that the finite can indeed mediate the infinite. The sacramental imagination’s intentionality, grounded in the body but at the same time exceeding its material-empirical constraints, is a hint, a clue, a symbol of the fittingness of embodiment to function as the access-point of divine revelation—not simply revelation-as-information, but revelation-as-participation. Recall that earlier we claimed that the Incarnation is the criterion that enables us to discern which imaginative refigurations are life-affirming and life-enhancing and which are life-

denying. Without the insight into the truth and the future that the sacramental complex of Creation–Incarnation–Resurrection gives us, and without the sacramental imagination that thinks otherwise about materiality to enable our current participation in divine life, we have little to guide us in discerning which choices will play out in a humanizing or dehumanizing way.

“If Christianity is true,” Timothy Radcliffe says, “then it does not have a point other than to point to God who is the point of everything” (Radcliffe, 1). This brilliantly succinct summary of the structure of creation is precisely the core judgment of the Catholic sacramental imagination. That imagination is the point where excess and access meet. By recognizing the sacramental depth of creation—by daring to think otherwise about materiality and finitude—the intentional striving of the sacramental imagination exceeds any reduction of reality to the material-empirical. This act of excess, though, is also an act of access, opening us to the transcending “excess” of God

that is mediated by the finite and renders the finite not only meaningful but blessed. The saving grace that God makes available to us in and through creation is the gift of divine love that exceeds even our wildest hopes (even the Prodigal Son is surprised by the father’s excess when he is received back not as a hired hand, nor even as a son, but at the highest rank, that of the honored guest [Luke 15:22-24]). See, then, how excess and access are mutually implicated: the sacramental imagination’s confession of transcendence-in-immanence is the moment when our access to the fullness of grace becomes possible. And it is God who makes actual both the point of access and imagination’s participative “excess.” The Christian who

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professes belief in the resurrection of Christ and in God as Trinity is thus already implicated in an imaginative construal of reality that reveals its true potential for *theôsis* and materiality's true structure as the finite mediation of the infinite—the continuing fulfillment of the possibilities announced at creation, intensified at the Incarnation, and confirmed at the Resurrection.

What, then, do sacraments and sacramentality want? They wish to share with us their plentitude of grace. They desire to provoke not only our participation in the saving work of Christ, but also the recognition of our deep resonance with the structure of creation, our sympathetic attunement to the overwhelming love of God who has chosen this time, this place, this materiality in order to transform us into lovers of grace and truth.*

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