

The Why and How of Liturgical Theology: Dissecting a Method

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Abstract

Liturgical theology is a relatively new sub-discipline of theology. Despite many efforts, clarity is still lacking in both its purpose and methodology. In this study, the liturgical-theological method of luminary Kevin W. Irwin is dissected, diagrammed, and evaluated in direct response to recent calls in the academy for clarity in liturgical-theological method; the study also contributes to the ongoing conversation as to what liturgical theology is, why it matters, and how it is to be undertaken.

Keywords

Liturgy, liturgical theology, ritual books, Kevin Irwin, theological method, sacramental theology, liturgical studies, sacramentality, contextual theology, Joris Geldhof

I. Introduction: Liturgical Theology and the Pressing Need for Methodological Clarity

As liturgical scholar Teresa Berger has observed, “in the last half-century, the liturgy has (re-)emerged as a distinctive source for theological reflection.”¹ Early work in the domain focused on crafting dialectical definitions of liturgy and theology, often relying on the sixth-century axiom *lex orandi, lex credendi*.² Work in liturgical-theological method

1. Teresa Berger, “The Challenge of Gender for Liturgical Tradition,” *Worship* 82.3 (May 2008) 243.
2. The connection of Christian ritualizing and doctrine is paradigmatically expressed in this axiom, which is also often stated as *ut legem credendi lex statuat supplicandi*—the rule of belief is established by the rule of prayer. The relationship between the two is complex and cyclical, but the point of the axiom is that worship is the apex of the expression of Christian belief, and that corporate worship thus hands on and shapes said belief through the ages. See Maxwell E. Johnson, *Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2013) *passim*.

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soon followed. Since this flowering of liturgical theology in the academy, scholars have produced an unparalleled number of works utilizing liturgy as the primary source.³ Though fewer such theologians have ventured explicitly into the question of methodology, several crucial works have emerged⁴ and the question of *how to do* liturgical theology remains a pressing and sometimes vexing question.

Pressing, also, is the question of *why* engaging in rigorous liturgical theology is essential or even urgent in the present day. The sacramental theologian and liturgical scholar David N. Power has argued convincingly, for example, that the decline in collective memory in “first-world” cultures is having a dire impact on the ability of collective worship to function effectively.⁵ An important way, though one of many, for the academy to explore this problem is via liturgical theology.

Part of the challenge when it comes to method in liturgical theology is that the broader field of liturgical studies is an inherently and inescapably interdisciplinary endeavor. Insights from disciplines beyond theology must inform liturgical theology, for example, if one were to investigate Power’s argument. Interdisciplinarity also means that scholars approach liturgical theology from different starting points. One might begin with musicology, while another may start with systematics, and yet another ritual/ethnographic research. As such, working towards the clarity Joris Geldhof argues for (and often provides), as well as clearly delineating and investigating extant and possible methods, are crucial tasks.

It is also true that liturgical theologians have an underlying methodological problem: how can they be sure to define the object of liturgical-theological reflection in a way that moves beyond just text, while at the same time recognizing text as a primary conveyer of meaning in human ritualizing? Though it is unquestionably true that all aspects of liturgical celebration constitute data for liturgical-theological reflection, it is still unclear how theologians are to consider this vast data set in a way that is both coherent and useful, and at the same time avoids the real threat of a methodological quagmire.⁶ To say the path ahead is not entirely clear is an understatement.

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3. Liturgy, here, refers to Christian ritualized worship, usually with some official status, and includes both liturgy as event as well as the various components that contribute to the enactment of said event. Crucial figures in the field include Mary Collins, I. H. Dalmais, Peter E. Fink, Albert Houssiau, Edward J. Kilmartin, Salvatore Marsili, David N. Power, Alexander Schmemmann, Cypriano Vagaggini, Gordon Lathrop, and Geoffrey Wainwright, to name a few.
 4. Some, now classic, contributions to method in liturgical theology include the work of Margaret Mary Kelleher, Kevin W. Irwin, Aidan Kavanagh, David Fagerberg, Jan Michael Joncas, Judith Kubicki, Mary McGann, Louis-Marie Chauvet, and Joyce Ann Zimmerman. The conversation continues in more recent work by Joris Geldhof, Martha Brundage, Brian Butcher, Andrew Louth, Bruce Morrill, Melanie Ross, Andrea Grillo, and Cláudio Carvalhaes (again, to name just a few).
 5. David N. Power, “The Receding Sea of Catholic Faith: Collective Memory and Common Worship,” *Irish Theological Quarterly* 79.4 (2014) 303–26.
 6. Joris Geldhof, “Liturgical Theology,” in *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Religion* (2 March 2015); <https://oxfordre.com/religion/view/10.1093/acrefore/9780199340378.001.0001/acrefore-9780199340378-e-14> (accessed 2 June 2023): “It is one thing to maintain that real liturgies are theology par excellence; it is quite another thing to effectively employ these liturgies in theological research and reflection.” In his *Liturgical Theology as a Research Program*, Geldhof calls this seeming lack of clarity the “overwhelming multiplicity of methods, models and paradigms” in liturgical theology (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2020) 16.

A beginning to a solution can be found in liturgical scholar Joris Geldhof's (Katholieke Universiteit Leuven) call for "a great amount of daring" in the methods that liturgical theologians employ.⁷ Experimentation is required that tests existing theological methods, as is the positing of new methodologies. This article is one step along this daring path, peering into the inner workings of a method and pointing forward to new routes on the liturgical-theological map. In many ways, the study is a reaction to Geldhof's 2020 work *Liturgical Theology as a Research Program*.⁸ In this book, Geldhof lays out five questions to guide a "research program" in liturgical theology:

1. What is the proper place of liturgical theology?
2. What past evolutions have there been and what tendencies are there currently in the field of liturgical theology?
3. What contents should liturgical theologians focus on?
4. How can liturgical theologians engage in research?
5. How can liturgical theology appropriately respond to what happens in church and society?

Geldhof's first and fourth questions are most relevant to this article. In terms of liturgical theology's "proper place," it would greatly benefit the academy to pay closer attention to liturgical theology as a sub-discipline. It serves as a "bridge-builder or go-between," Geldhof says, for sacramental theology and liturgical studies, as well for the historical and pastoral sides of liturgical studies.⁹ Liturgical theology also has the potential to inform the broader discipline of theology in relation to ecumenism and truly contextual theology.¹⁰ Even further, Geldhof suggests that in theology over the past century (at least) there has been a near universal *Liturgievergessenheit* ("the broad phenomenon of forgetting or neglecting liturgy within theology"¹¹) in the global West¹² to the detriment of the discipline. While, of course, a liturgical theologian would be likely to argue for greater prominence of the discipline, Geldhof's argument that "Liturgy qua liturgy—i.e., not liturgy as a repertoire of textual illustrations but as a constitutive organic whole—has not been at the forefront of mainline theology ... for centuries"¹³ is quite convincing and opens systematic theology to an array of criticisms. To be sure,

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7. Joris Geldhof, "German Romanticism and Liturgical Theology," *Horizons* 43.2 (December 2016) 306.
 8. Geldhof, *Liturgical Theology as a Research Program*.
 9. *Ibid.*, 11. He goes on to say liturgical theologians "help classical sacramental theologians overcome blind spots and they help liturgical scholars find the appropriate theological questions and language." And in regard to historical and pastoral liturgical studies, "Through their approaches, insights and ideas they can connect the results of historical studies with pastoral realities and vice versa." *Ibid.*
 10. *Ibid.*, 13–15.
 11. *Ibid.*, 8.
 12. *Ibid.*, 16.
 13. *Ibid.*, 16.

the scope of liturgy must not be separated from the one of fundamental theologies and philosophies of religion. Where else could God's Word be heard? Where else is it spoken? Where else is the Word of God embodied in concrete circumstances and received in one's community and one's life?¹⁴

This article aims to help reposition liturgical theology more squarely in the center of the broader theological task.

In terms of Geldhof's fourth question about method, he states, "It is not clear which method, or methods, liturgical theology must preferentially adopt and why."¹⁵ He goes on to assert that,

The basic methodological problem ... concerns ... *access to liturgical reality*, which seems ... hardly reflected upon. I mean access in a quite literal sense: how can one access liturgy? How can one approach it, enter it, become part of it, observe it, in such a way that it allows one to develop theological insight about it, from it, into it, with it?¹⁶

This article also aims, then, to respond to Geldhof's methodological question.

In what follows, the liturgical-theological method of Kevin W. Irwin—as put forward in his monumental works *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology* (2018)¹⁷ and *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology* (2016)¹⁸—will be examined in detail, providing a model for similar work related to other methods and

14. Ibid., 18.

15. Ibid., 15.

16. Ibid., 93, original emphasis.

17. Kevin W. Irwin, *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology*, rev. ed. (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2018). Many readers will know that this work was first published in 1994 with a slightly different title, *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1994). An unavoidable question, of course, is how did Irwin's liturgical theological method evolve from 1994 to 2018? A deep dive into this question would expand this article beyond allowable parameters but could surely be taken up in another paper that focuses on how evolving contexts require evolution of method. The 2018 edition is revised and expanded, to be sure, but it is my sense that the underlying method remains essentially the same with a more intense focus on the notion of sacramentality. The primary evolution is that the context Irwin envisages as the subject of liturgical theology has expanded. He notes such in his introduction, delineating domains that have influenced his thinking around liturgical theology (catechesis, mystagogy, liturgical formation, and liturgy and the new evangelization). See Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., xvii–xxiv. He notes also several "new contexts" relevant to liturgical theology, at least for North American Roman Catholicism: religious affiliation, contemporary (North) American Society, the "worship mall," changes in rites since 1994 with the corollary of what has occurred in the implementation of the liturgical reform since then, a renewed need to consider what is meant by the "authority of liturgy" in Roman Catholic theology especially in light of the insights of Pope Francis, and, finally, changing politics around liturgy since 1994 and changes in Irwin's personal context. See Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., xxviii–lx.

18. Kevin W. Irwin, *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2016).

bringing some clarity to what it means to *do* liturgical theology.¹⁹ (It is worth noting that Geldhof calls *Context and Text* “probably the most important reflection about method in the field of liturgical theology.”²⁰) This article begins by exploring Irwin’s work and influences, moves on to delineate the foundations of his method, then dissects and diagrams his method, including modes of utilizing the method. The article concludes with some critical engagement with Irwin’s method as well as by noting some open questions about Irwin’s liturgical-theological project and liturgical theology in general that point forward to future work that needs to be commenced by theologians. It must be said at the outset that Irwin is a Roman Catholic theologian and that his method focuses on the post-conciliar Latin rite. His method is ecumenically useful, nonetheless—as he asserts, as the method delineated below will make clear, and as the influences on his professional life make nearly impossible to refute.

The overarching aim of this article is not to put Irwin’s method into conversation with other methods (even Geldhof’s), but rather, first, to answer Geldhof’s call in the liturgical academy to provide clarity surrounding method in liturgical theology, which might in turn spur liturgical theologians to more careful articulation of the *why* and *how* of liturgical theology. One could assert, notwithstanding many exceptions, that often liturgical theologians, me included, talk too much *about* liturgical theology and might make more of an impact if we were to focus more on *accessing liturgical reality*, as Geldhof puts it, from a theological point of view—in other words, *doing* liturgical theology. Such access requires method, and this article aims to delineate and clarify a specific method with an eye to encouraging its more frequent use *in context*, as Irwin might say.

A second part of the fundamental aim of this article is to encourage experimentation and creativity in the devising of new or cognate methods for doing liturgical theology, which Geldhof has flagged as essential to the future of the discipline. Discerning the inner workings of a particular method can aid in its critique as well as in constructive methodological work in parallel or alternative directions.

Irwin’s method is not revolutionary in the sense that its aim is to upend how we think about liturgical reform and renewal, but, if taken seriously and put into practice, while of course noting this putting into practice requires the active collaboration of Church authorities (here, in the Roman Catholic context), the critical edge of Irwin’s method would require much change in our current way of *doing* liturgy. The edge of Irwin’s insight remains the principles of liturgical reform of the Second Vatican Council. While the academy is quite familiar with said principles, it is my (and perhaps Irwin’s) assertion

19. For further work in this domain, see Jason J. McFarland and Stephen Burns, eds., *Doing Liturgical Theology: Method in Context*, Liturgia Condenda (Leuven: Peeters, forthcoming). In this collection, methods of numerous luminaries are tested in context, including those of Louis-Marie Chauvet, Anscar Chupungco, Mary Collins, Andrea Grillo, Kevin Irwin, Aidan Kavanagh, Margaret Mary Kelleher, Gordon Lathrop, Ann Loades, I-to Loh, Jaci Maraschin, David Power, Gail Ramshaw, Don Saliers, Alexander Schmemmann, Frank Senn, Bryan Spinks, Masao Takenaka, Jacques von Allman, and Joyce Ann Zimmerman.

20. Geldhof, *Liturgical Theology as a Research Program*, 122, original emphasis.

that the liturgical reform has barely begun, and its potential for transformation remains largely unearthed.²¹ Liturgical theology, done well, has a critical role in the task ahead.

2. Work and Influences: Kevin Irwin's Liturgical-Theological Project

2.1 Irwin's Influence(s)

Kevin Irwin's influence within Catholic sacramental theology and liturgical studies is difficult to overstate. He is a prolific writer: more than twenty books, eighty-plus articles, over ninety reviews, and counting. Given the volume of his work, naturally, his interests span far beyond method in liturgical theology to areas such as liturgical spirituality and, perhaps most importantly, the environment. In this latter arena, his insights about the inseparability of creation and sacraments, grounded in the principle of sacramentality, have shed light on the "how" of Christian sacraments. He is not new to the fray and has recognized sacramental theology's potential to inform the debate about care for the environment since at least the early 1990s. The enduring nature of this concern is clear from his 2016 published commentary on *Laudato Si'*, Pope Francis' encyclical on the environment.

Irwin has reflected upon his "methodological influences."²² He notes Benedictine origins, naming Aidan Kavanagh specifically.²³ The faculty of Sant' Anselmo, where Irwin completed his doctoral studies in the 1970s, completes the pantheon of early influencers, noting also the influence of Odo Casel's work.²⁴ Later, scholars at the Institute for Pastoral Liturgy in Padua were highly influential, as were a pantheon of non-Roman Catholic scholars as well as colleagues from his work as a professor at the Catholic University of America²⁵ and the University of Notre Dame. Irwin's thought continues to evolve through interactions with the work of other scholars and it is of some importance that he notes his influences as international, ecumenical, and collegial (Table 1).²⁶

21. Indeed, investigations into the "reception" of Vatican II have emerged as important avenues for research in Roman Catholic theology in general. See, for example, the new Research Centre for Studies of the Second Vatican Council led by Dr Emmanuel Nathan at Australian Catholic University.

22. See Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., xiii–xv.

23. *Ibid.*, xiii.

24. *Ibid.*, xiii–xiv.

25. Cf. Gerard Austin, Mary Collins, Stephen Happel, Kevin W. Irwin, Margaret Mary Kelleher, Frederick R. McManus, David N. Power, and Gerard Sloyan, *Eucharist: Toward the Third Millennium*, Papers presented at a symposium held to celebrate the 25th anniversary of the liturgy program at Catholic University (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997). Other later colleagues include Dominic Serra and Michael Wiczak.

26. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., xiii–xv. Authors are listed here in the order Irwin lists them; whether there is any significance to the ordering is unclear. In his book *The Sacraments*, Irwin provides a very short bibliography "on method," which provides an important insight into his key influences: David Fagerberg, Maxwell Johnson, Aidan Kavanagh, Richard McCall, Alexander Schmemmann, Cipriano Vagaggini, and Geoffrey Wainwright.

Table 1. Kevin Irwin's account of those who have influenced his liturgical-theological work.²⁷

Early	Later	IPL (Padua)	Ecumenical	Collegial
1960s	Hans Bernhard	Aldo Natale	Alexander	Academies
Aidan Kavanagh	Meyer	Terrin	Schmemmann	North American
1970s (<i>Sant' Anselmo</i>)	Bruno	Giorgio	Thomas Talley	Academy of
Burkhard	Kleinheyer	Bonaccorso	Geoffrey	Liturgy
Neunheuser	Albert	Alceste Catella	Wainwright	Societas Liturgica
Salvatore Marsili	Gerhards	Renato DeZan	Don Saliers	<i>Catholic University</i>
Cipriano Vagaggini	Benedikt	Silvio Maggiani	Dwight Vogel	<i>of America</i>
Gerhard Békés	Kranemann	S. Ubbiali	Karen	Gerard Austin
Magnus Löhrer	Thomas Pott	Manilo Sodi	Westerfield-	Margaret Mary
Adrien Nocent	Louis-Marie		Tucker	Kelleher
Philippe Rouillard	Chauvet		Gordon Lathrop	David Power
Basil Studer	Edward			Dominic Serra
<i>Non-contemporary</i>	Kilmartin			Michael Witczak
<i>influence via study</i>	Robert Taft			<i>Notre Dame</i>
Odo Casel	Patrick Regan			Paul Bradshaw
	Jeremy Driscoll			Maxwell Johnson
				David Fagerberg
				Mark Searle

2.2 Irwin's Work

Theological method has been a focus of Irwin's work from the start, as his doctoral dissertation makes clear.²⁸ His first published work on method in liturgical theology (beyond his dissertation) appeared in 1989,²⁹ with his useful primer on the topic appearing in 1990.³⁰ Not long after, in 1994, the first edition of Irwin's magnum opus in liturgical theology was published: *Context and Text: Method in Liturgical Theology*. Since then, this book has endured as one of the primary works in liturgical-theological method. In 2018, the revised and expanded edition of this book appeared with its subtitle slightly adjusted: *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology*.

In the years between 1994 and today, Irwin continued his theological work in several arenas, including the theology of ordained ministry, liturgical reform, ecumenism, the environment, Pope Francis' theology of liturgy,³¹ and liturgy in time of

27. Ibid.

28. Kevin W. Irwin, *American Lutherans and Roman Catholics in Dialogue on the Eucharist: A Methodological Critique and Proposal*, Sacramentum 5, Studia Anselmiana 76 (Rome: Studia Anselmiana, 1979). This book is a published version of his doctoral dissertation.

29. Kevin W. Irwin, "Method in Liturgical Theology: Context is Text," *Église et Théologie* 20.3 (1989) 407–24.

30. Kevin W. Irwin, *Liturgical Theology: A Primer* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1990).

31. Kevin W. Irwin, *Pope Francis and the Liturgy: The Call to Holiness and Mission* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2020).

pandemic.³² The majority of his scholarly output, however, has remained within the spheres of sacramental and liturgical theology, with method always explicit and at the fore. Two crucial themes that emerge in Irwin's work prior to the publication of the revised edition of *Context and Text* are environmental theology and sacramentality. Indeed, the two are rightly intertwined in Irwin's thought and work.³³ He has written much on the topic, even renaming a chapter from "Symbol" to "Sacramentality" in the revised edition of *Context and Text*.³⁴

3. Kevin Irwin's Method for Liturgical Theology

3.1 Foundations

Irwin's writing on and in liturgical theology is vast. Here, two works are taken as summative of his thinking: *The Sacraments: Historical Foundations and Liturgical Theology* (2016) and *Context and Text: A Method for Liturgical Theology* (2018). While the latter is certainly Irwin's most fulsome articulation of his liturgical-theological method, the former is also relevant in that it shows how his ideas on method permeate his work in sacramental theology and in that it serves to (usefully) connect and dissolve boundaries between the theological subdisciplines of sacramental theology and liturgical theology. In addition, *The Sacraments* includes a sharp and concise delineation of method.

Irwin's way of viewing theology, and method, finds inspiration in patristic ways of speaking theologically about sacraments. He notes, "The authority of liturgy in the patristic era was not that of a simple deposit transmitted intact. The *lex orandi* both reflected a living theology and supported a response to liturgy in Christian living."³⁵ Patristic theology of sacraments was primarily in the form of mystagogic catecheses, which by their nature reflect on liturgical *events* rather than liturgy as some meta-reality in Christian life. The theology of sacraments is not limited to a "uniform liturgical/sacramental theology," and indeed it could not be.³⁶

The context in which we do theology today is a post-Vatican-II-liturgical-reform context, Irwin argues, in which fostering participation and comprehension are indispensable to

32. Kevin W. Irwin, *Liturgy and Sacraments in a COVID World: Renewal Not Restoration* (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2021).

33. See, e.g., Kevin W. Irwin, "The Sacramentality of Creation and the Role of Creation in Liturgy and Sacraments," in *Preserving the Creation: Environmental Theology and Ethic*, ed. Kevin W. Irwin and Edmund J. Pellegrino (Washington DC: Georgetown University Press, 1994) 67–111.

34. "Sacramentality" and the "sacramental imagination" have become a prevailing mode for understanding sacraments in recent decades. Irwin notes, "The change in terminology from 'symbol' to 'sacramentality' reflects my evolving thought about the sacramental principle, which is presumed and given ritual expression in the liturgy. Succinctly put, 'sacramentality' is broader than 'symbol.'" *Context and Text*, rev. ed., lx–lxi.

35. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 171.

36. *Ibid.*, 171.

liturgical celebration.³⁷ Diversity of liturgical expression, even within the same liturgical rite, is taken for granted. This reality requires theological reflection that can accommodate diversity of praxis. As such, a reappropriation of the patristic model is especially useful.

With this aptness of the patristic model comes a corollary that one can derive from Irwin's work: systematic theology of the sacraments as we usually think of it decreases in relevance and usefulness as a means of interpreting sacraments theologically, as its focus is coming to understand sacraments in some universal sense³⁸ in contrast to understanding sacraments celebrated in a particular time and place with a particular community.³⁹ Another implication in this shift is that the boundary between liturgical and sacramental theology blurs and even dissolves. Sacramental theology must be a liturgical theology of the sacraments, and liturgical theology *is* sacramental theology.

Liturgy for Irwin is a *complexus* of symbols, words, gestures, music, space, objects, vestments, vessels, and so on. It is this *complexus* that is the subject and source of liturgical theology.⁴⁰ The liturgical theologian recognizes that a full theology of a liturgical *event* considers all facets of said event, or at least that the "eventing" of liturgy must be at the foreground of a liturgical theology. Discreet interpretation forms part of the picture, but even this sort of interpretation fails if it does not take some account of the interrelatedness of the aspect under consideration to the whole. For this reason, for

37. Irwin sees our current context as a key to why we must do liturgical and sacramental theology in a way that recognizes liturgy as *event*: "Among other reasons why the liturgy can be used in such a way today is because of the scope of the reform—that is, all liturgies were revised; in their breadth they offer a host of prayers and scripture readings and rites to reflect on, especially when compared to the previous Roman Missal and Roman Ritual; and most often the sacraments are celebrated in the vernacular, making comprehension and the embrace of the rite possible." Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 201–2.

38. In some ways, the primary concerns of this type of systematic sacramental theology, such as sacramental efficacy, have been overtaken by the principle of sacramentality. Sacraments "work" because we are ritualizing beings. Reality, as such, is the human interface with God's self-communication. Our sacramental rituals, in which we employ food, music, movement, Word, etc., transform and enlighten by shaking us awake to the fact that all creation shimmers with God's presence and that grace is always and everywhere present. Cf. the work of Michael Himes and Simon Oliver (among many others) on sacramentality.

39. Irwin says, "For a variety of reasons, including the increased lack of vernacular usage for the liturgy and the distancing of the community from active engagement in the enacted rituals of the liturgy, after the patristic era, the church's *lex orandi* was less appreciated as a central source for the theology appropriated by most Christians." Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 173. I would argue this was an unfortunate (though likely inevitable) deviation in sacramental theology, which, if detached from the *lex orandi*, is meaningless. There were good reasons for this deviation, however, including efforts to maintain doctrinal and ecclesiological unity in the Church. See Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 173–79.

40. As Irwin points out, we see this idea asserted by Pope Benedict XVI in his apostolic exhortation *Sacramentum Caritatis* (2007) in which he notes "the primacy of liturgical action" in section 34. See Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 178–79.

Irwin, both “theology of liturgy” and “theology drawn from the liturgy”—distinct but inseparable—are “liturgical theology.”⁴¹

Theology of liturgy “describes what Christian liturgy is and what it does in terms of actualizing the reality of Christ’s paschal mystery for the church, gathered and enlivened by power of the Holy Spirit.”⁴² Three theological principles are inherent to liturgy and, thus, underpin a “theology of liturgy,” and mean that “the craft of theologizing on the act of liturgy necessarily focuses on how the church’s central saving mysteries are uniquely experienced in and through the liturgy”: anamnesis, epiclesis, and ecclesiology.⁴³

Theology drawn from the liturgy concerns the use of liturgy as “a generative source for developing theology.”⁴⁴ This mode of doing theology in Irwin’s thinking relates most obviously to systematics, wherein one could articulate a liturgical Christology or liturgical ecclesiology. A liturgical spirituality would also result from this sort of theologizing, as would a liturgical moral theology or ethics.⁴⁵ Indeed, by emphasizing the doxological nature of theology, Irwin asserts that not only is the symbiosis between *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* crucial to liturgical theology, but also that one must consider the implications of this symbiosis for living, that is, a *lex vivendi* is also implied in a liturgical theology.⁴⁶

Before delving specifically into the method put forward in *Context and Text*, it is important to note a few of Irwin’s foundational assertions related to liturgical theology and the purpose of the book. One crucial claim of Irwin’s work in liturgical-theological method—one that is firmly grounded in the vision of liturgy put forward by the Liturgical Movement and the liturgical reform—is that:

each and every time we engage in the sacred liturgy is always a *new event*—a new event of *salvation, redemption, and reconciliation* with God and one another (among many other things), and a new event of our *communal growth in holiness* and of our *communal self-transcendence*.⁴⁷

Irwin also explains:

what this book aims to do is to view the liturgy through a theological lens, to explore the multifaceted reality that the liturgy is and celebrates, and to offer both a critique of the reformed liturgy and suggestions for improved celebrations.⁴⁸

41. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., 71. Though Irwin surely sees the distinction as important, he is pushing the reader beyond the methodological distraction of dissecting the distinction, which one can see in other pivotal works in liturgical theology, such as Aidan Kavanagh, *On Liturgical Theology* (New York: Pueblo, 1984) and David Fagerberg, *Theologia Prima: What is Liturgical Theology?*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: Hillenbrand, 2004).

42. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., 71–72.

43. *Ibid.*, 71–77.

44. *Ibid.*, 77.

45. *Ibid.*, 77–79.

46. *Ibid.*, 79–82.

47. *Ibid.*, xv, original emphasis.

48. *Ibid.*, xxiii.

Crucial here is that liturgical theology as a discipline has at least a twofold purpose: to plumb the depth of meaning in liturgical events and to contribute to ongoing liturgical reform. Liturgical theology, thus, has a critical edge.⁴⁹

Finally, even though Irwin's critique in the book pertains exclusively to post-conciliar Roman Catholic liturgy, he sees *Context and Text* as "a contribution to ecumenical liturgical method and theology,"⁵⁰ which makes sense given that ecumenism is a major focus of his overall scholarly project.

3.2 Delineating and Diagramming Irwin's Method I: His Meta-Method

Our concern throughout this book ... is to articulate what it means to experience and appreciate "liturgy from the inside" in which every text, act, gesture, posture, and element from creation or manufactured by the work of human hands has a theological meaning, with many of them containing more than one meaning, because many of the components of liturgical action are inherently multivalent. These components are experienced together in the liturgical rite, the enactment of which influences how they are understood and interpreted.⁵¹

In *Context and Text*, Irwin devotes the entirety of chapter 2 to method, of which most of the rest of the book presents a demonstration. Here, he puts forward a twofold thesis: *context is text / text shapes context*. While a clever play on words and a compressed, complicated assertion, Irwin unpacks the thesis as follows. First, *context is text*: "liturgical context is text, in the sense that context provides the source—text (again meaning 'texts and rites' as enacted)—for developing liturgical theology."⁵² Context as text allows and facilitates a theological interpretation of the "constitutive elements of the liturgy—sacramentality, Word, euchology, time, and arts," which are the data for articulating a liturgical theology.⁵³ Context (which is the "text" for interpretation) includes three dimensions:

- *Historical evolution of a rite*: Here liturgical history and tradition are investigated to reveal a rite's origins, its contents, and changes to the rite over time and from place to place, not only in terms of ritual content, but also in terms of how the rite and its component parts have been understood theologically. The historical investigation also allows one to discern between peripheral and essential ritual and theological aspects of a rite.⁵⁴
- *The current post-conciliar rite*: Here the liturgical theologian investigates the reformed (post-Vatican II) rite to discern its "theological meanings," focusing

49. See Kevin W. Irwin, "The Critical Task of Liturgical Theology: Prospects and Proposals," in *Eucharist: Toward the Third Millennium* (Chicago: Liturgy Training Publications, 1997) 65–80.

50. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., xxviii.

51. *Ibid.*, 61.

52. *Ibid.*, 87, original emphasis.

53. *Ibid.*, 85.

54. *Ibid.*, 87.

on the entirety of the liturgical *complexus*. Interpretation must account for the diverse parts and genres within a rite, and the interaction thereof. Proper celebration (that is, enacting the rite according to the rubrics of / as envisaged by the rite, with permissible options and flexibility taken into account) is *assumed*, and the influence of the “setting for liturgy” and “conducting of liturgy” is considered in terms of how they “facilitate and enhance the assembly’s appropriation and understanding of the scriptural texts, prayers, symbols, and gestures.”⁵⁵ A hermeneutic within this dimension of context is the positive evaluation of the liturgical reform and the resulting rites, asserting their normativity and their “richness,” particularly in comparison to Tridentine rites.⁵⁶

- *The critical function of liturgical theology*: Here, the liturgical theologian turns the focus to both (a) how the official rites might be revised, improved,⁵⁷ enhanced, or made better suited to culture(s) in subsequent editions of the rite, and (b) how a rite might be conducted more effectively, as the post-conciliar liturgy, with its flexibility and inherent demand for active participation requires careful and systematic preparation, formation, and the development and fostering of particular skills among members of the assembly.⁵⁸ The ongoing nature of liturgical reform and its indispensability are taken for granted,⁵⁹ which means that the “critical function” of liturgical theology is fundamental, as it must inform the ongoing reform and renewal of the liturgy within all of Christian society. This function also means one might add another subsidiary dimension to the *lex orandi / lex credendi / lex vivendi* nexus, that dimension being the *lex agendi* or law of effective liturgical enactment, which is clearly related to the idea of *ars celebrandi*. There are boundaries and guides to critique within this critical mode of liturgical theology, which relate to the prior two dimensions (history, current rites) as well as to scripture, doctrine, cultural norms, philosophical/confessional starting points, and so forth.

These three dimensions of context provide the liturgical theologian analytical access to the rites and facilitate the interpretation and analysis of the constitutive elements of liturgy, which include (according to Irwin’s method) sacramentality, Word, euchology, time, and arts.

Irwin goes on to articulate the other half of his thesis, *text shapes context*: “the act of liturgy can influence the shape of theology, ecumenical dialogue, and living the moral, spiritual life.”⁶⁰ This methodological principle gets to the heart of things, exploring why participating in the liturgy matters in the first place. As Irwin says, “Methodologically ... our

55. *Ibid.*, 88.

56. *Ibid.*, 88.

57. For an example of such critical engagement, see Jason J. McFarland, “Mass Antiphons and the Dialectic of Liturgical Genre and Translation,” *Questions Liturgiques* 102 (2022) 118–35.

58. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., 88–90.

59. See also Jason J. McFarland, “The Processes of Liturgical Reform: A Roman Catholic Response,” in *When We Pray: The Future of Common Prayer*, ed. Stephen Burns and Robert Gribben (Melbourne: Coventry Press, 2020) 357–81.

60. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., 91.

concern is with the theological and spiritual implications of engaging in liturgy, that is, the *constitutive implications* that arise from the theological interpretation of the constitutive elements of liturgy.”⁶¹ Liturgical theology, therefore, is a “way of redirecting theology as intrinsically oriented toward confession, thanksgiving, and praise of God.”⁶² Thus, liturgical theology can serve as a corrective or methodological solution in instances when doing theology has become disconnected from conversion or from any real experience of the *kerygma* that emanates into life—the whole point of Christianity in the first place. Here the *lex vivendi* is clearly at play.

The two figures or diagrams of liturgical-theological method that follow depict, first, the overarching connections between the fundamental elements of liturgical theology, that is, *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and their corollaries *lex vivendi* and *lex agendi*. The second diagram sketches Irwin’s “meta-method” or the broad method put forward in *Context and Text* (Figures 1 and 2).

Employing the term “meta-method,” even though not used by Irwin, intends to encompass Irwin’s overarching methodological achievement for theological investigation of liturgical rites. It does not have a particular rite in mind and has broad potential for application in a variety of contexts.⁶³ In sum, “doing” liturgical theology according to Irwin’s meta-method involves a motivating question that looks to characteristics of a liturgical event for an answer:

- sacramentality
- Word
- euchology
- time
- arts.

These aspects comprise the interactive data for analysis, viewed through the interpretive lenses of

- the historical evolution of the rite
- the current rite and relevant underlying principles of the liturgical reform
- critique of the rite (both the official ritual book and the rite as enacted).

61. Ibid., 91, original emphasis.

62. Ibid., 91.

63. As noted earlier, Irwin does acknowledge his own context (North American Roman Catholic, probably English-speaking), but the method has ecumenical use as well and is open to adaptation. It is useful to note here Mark Francis’s review of *Context and Text* (2018) from *Worship* 95 (January 2021) 92–94. Francis gives an enthusiastically positive evaluation of the book, except for “the lack of voices from the global south” (93) and a “Eurocentric point of view” in relation to discussions of popular religion (94). One cannot argue with Francis here on his specific points. Every author, however, has their own context from which they write, and no author can consider all perspectives. Testing Irwin’s method outside of the North American Roman Catholic sphere would be a useful exercise, indeed.

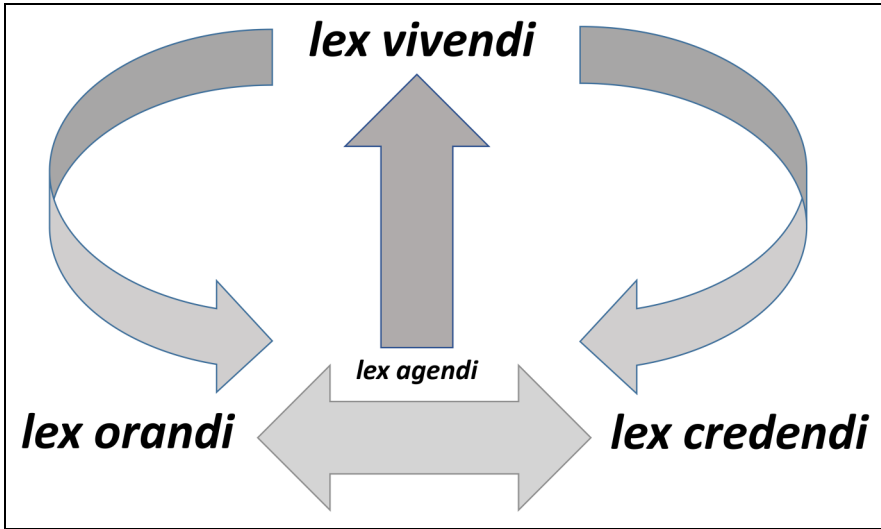


Figure 1. The relationship of fundamental components for liturgical theology.

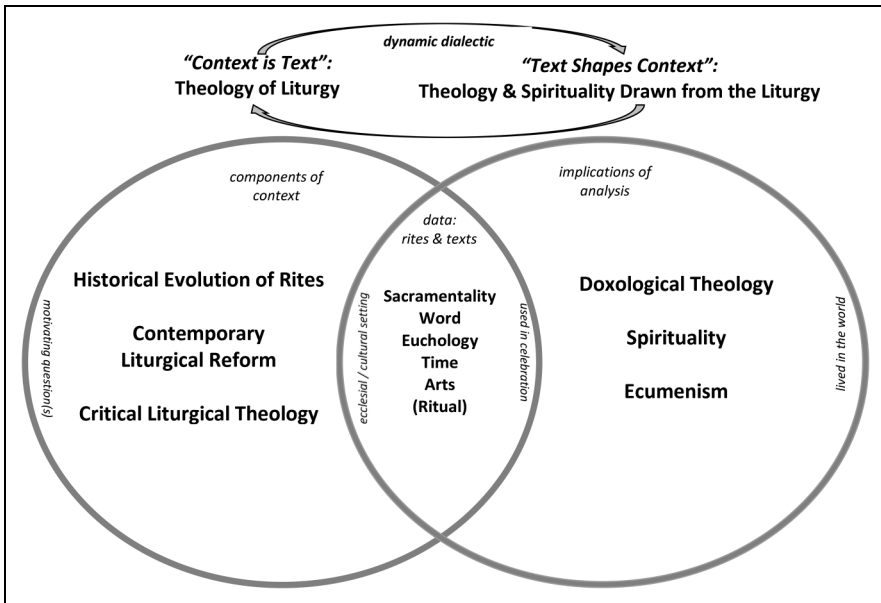


Figure 2. Diagramming Irwin's meta-method. (The closed circles do not indicate separate domains as in a Venn diagram, but aim to show, imperfectly, the aspects of Irwin's complex).

The data thus interpreted, as well as influenced by the

- ecclesial/cultural setting
- actual celebration or event

is brought to bear on constructing a “theology and spirituality drawn from the liturgy” in terms of

- doxological theology (implications for the doing of theology in whatever mode)
- spirituality (the Christian life outside the context of liturgical worship)
- ecumenism (implications for ecclesial mutual-understanding).

3.3 *Delineating and Diagramming Irwin’s Method 2: His Infra-Method*

In his 2016 book *The Sacraments*, Irwin demonstrates an application of his meta-method to a more specific context, noting its implications to a specific realm of theology: Christian *sacramental rites* (baptism, Eucharist, etc.) and what liturgical-theological investigation of said rites reveals for *sacramental theology*. This application is here termed “infra-method” (again, not a term Irwin uses) as a way of distinguishing it from Irwin’s meta-method in its particularity and specific focus. In this book Irwin articulates two fundamental methodological principles:

1. Each and every thing that we use [and do] in the liturgy ... has a theological meaning, and sometimes more than one.
2. Each and every act of liturgy is an immediate and direct experience of the saving mysteries of our salvation, mediated to us through the complexus of words, gestures, signs, and silences (among other things) that comprise the sacred liturgy.⁶⁴

These principles have serious implications for doing liturgical theology. First, all aspects of liturgical celebration are potentially (and even necessarily) the proper subjects of liturgical theology. Second, knowing what to pay attention to is key to the task of liturgical theology. Third, knowing how various aspects of liturgical celebration function and relate to one another is essential.

In *The Sacraments*, he also puts forward

four sources for theology drawn from the liturgy [that] should be collected, studied, and prayed over for any inquiry into the theological meaning of sacraments in general, an individual sacrament, or any part of the rite of a sacrament. These four sources offer the data on which a liturgical theology of the sacraments can be based.

64. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 188.

1. Scripture readings
2. Prayers of blessing, consecration, and absolution (e.g., eucharistic prayer, the blessing of water at baptism)
3. Other prayers of the liturgy (e.g., collects, solemn blessings, prayers over the people)
4. Sacramental signs, gestures, and postures.⁶⁵

The point here is to enable a theologian to interpret a “theology from the rites.”⁶⁶ The seeming limitation of context here has to do with how one understands liturgy. If it is the official, public worship of the church, the official dimension means that “the liturgical books that are presently used in the church’s liturgy to celebrate the sacraments ... should be regarded as the primary sources for sacramental theology.”⁶⁷

Still, Irwin recognizes the ever-present dialectic between what is contained in the liturgical books and actual practice (or liturgy as *event*, which takes us back to his meta-method of *Context and Text*). The boundaries in *The Sacraments* pertain specifically to a liturgical theology of *sacraments* because the goal is to discern the church’s understanding of sacraments through its official rites. If, however, the goal is to understand, determine, and articulate theology expressed in and through a particular liturgical celebration, the field of data becomes broader. Perhaps what we see here is Irwin’s distinction between sacramental theology *per se* and liturgical theology broadly understood. To be sure, there are likely other infra-methods one can derive from Irwin’s meta-method.

On one hand, liturgy exists only in its celebration, and it is only in celebration that believers encounter the theology of the liturgy. On the other hand, the rites (official liturgical books) of the church provide boundaries to proper celebration and to a correct understanding of the theology of sacraments and other liturgical celebrations, drawing, as they do, on the authoritative sources of scripture and tradition.⁶⁸

What the rites put forward as normative is one thing, but it is another question altogether as to what theology is expressed in a particular liturgical celebration—relying as it does upon translating the contents of the ritual book (really just a collection of instructions and texts) into performance. Even more complex is the matter of how to discern the means and effectiveness of the appropriation of said “contents” by the ritualizing believer. Within specific contexts and communities, local expressions and understandings can and do flower that offer new insights into the theology of the liturgy, and that might, over time, even influence the development of the official rites (i.e., *text shapes context*).

Irwin approaches this critical issue in *The Sacraments* in his discussion of “actual celebrations of the liturgy.”⁶⁹ He notes church buildings and music as key variables,

65. Ibid., 190.

66. Ibid., 190.

67. Ibid., 180.

68. Thus, the processes of liturgical reform, liturgical translation, and liturgical inculturation are not optional or trivial, but rather critical complex tasks that sustain and guarantee the coherence of the liturgical life of the church.

69. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 197.

in addition to the variety intrinsic to the reformed liturgy.⁷⁰ The crux of the matter—and the reason doing liturgical theology is a much more varied and complex task than traditional systematic sacramental theology—is that,

given the present structure of the reformed liturgy with its variety and flexibility, there is the issue of whether what is experienced at liturgy conforms to what the ritual books envision ... In other words, there are variables in the way the liturgy is celebrated, and sometimes the description of a liturgical ritual is one thing, and what actually happens when the rite is celebrated is another. This requires being attentive to what is actually done in the celebration.⁷¹

Or, put another way, “Effective worship is possible only through what is affective.”⁷² Care must be taken in preparing and celebrating liturgy to make sure it is *effectively affective*. If not, it fails to function as it should, can, and must. Once again, therefore, there must be a critical edge to liturgical theology’s interaction with liturgical events.

The methodological outcome of Irwin’s *The Sacraments* is an infra-method that emanates from the insights of his meta-method but differs in terms of its specific data points and theological underpinnings. As such the book is an important resource for understanding the potential of Irwin’s meta-method to be aimed at a wide array of liturgical/ritual data and events. The infra-method includes eight elements constitutive to doing a liturgical theology of the sacraments:

The way sacraments work:

1. Sacramentality
2. Humans and human work
3. Word enacted
4. Prayer events

What happens in liturgy:

1. Experience of the Trinity
2. Paschal memorial
3. *Communio*
4. “Already” and “not yet”⁷³

In his doing of liturgical theology in *The Sacraments*, the objects of analysis are liturgical texts (readings and prayers), including the text that comprises each, each text’s place within the ritual, and the text’s interconnectedness to other texts. All this together forms the *context* or subject for theological reflection. Of course, this is an obvious methodological turn when considering the proclamation of scripture or the utterance of a

70. Ibid., 197–99. E.g., rubrics that indicate the celebrant should speak “in these or similar words” (implying the permissibility of improvisation), and the array of choices of readings and prayers available in many liturgical celebrations.

71. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 197.

72. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., 413.

73. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 202–3.

liturgical prayer, but Irwin also utilizes this “context” in his consideration of the first two aspects of how sacraments work (sacramentality, humans, and human work) and the four dimensions of what happens in liturgy (experience of the Trinity, paschal memorial, *communio*, “already” and “not yet”). All dimensions are exemplified through a skilled and insightful analysis of liturgical texts, introductions to official liturgical books, the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, and other ecclesiastical documents.

While Irwin is always careful to recognize and assert the influence the broader liturgical context has on the communication of theology within worshipping liturgical communities (indeed, this is a key assertion of his work), we do not actually encounter liturgical-theological reflection and analysis that takes other elements of the liturgy as their subject, except when this can be done in relation to liturgical texts.⁷⁴

Irwin’s assertion of the broader context—the entirety of the liturgical event and its sources (liturgical books) as the subjects of liturgical theology—is clearly a fundamental priority in his method. He calls the conclusion to *Sacraments* “Sacramental Celebration Is Sacramental Theology,” and ends the book by encouraging the liturgically participatory believer/minister to “be prepared”, “participate” in the liturgy well, and “live out in life what we celebrate” (Figure 3).⁷⁵

In sum, the “doing” of liturgical theology according to Irwin’s infra-method looks to a sacramental liturgy’s

- scripture readings
- prayers of blessing
- other prayers
- sacramental signs, gestures, postures

which comprise the interactive data for analysis, and which are then viewed through the interpretive lenses of

- sacramentality
- humans and human work
- Word enacted
- prayer events.

The data thus interpreted, as well as influenced by the

- liturgical space
- music of the liturgy
- actual celebration

74. E.g., in chapter 12 “Humans and Human Work,” he discusses their theological significance with reference to scripture, the General Instruction of the Roman Missal, and to a section of the Roman Canon. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 235–37.

75. Irwin, *The Sacraments*, 371–73.

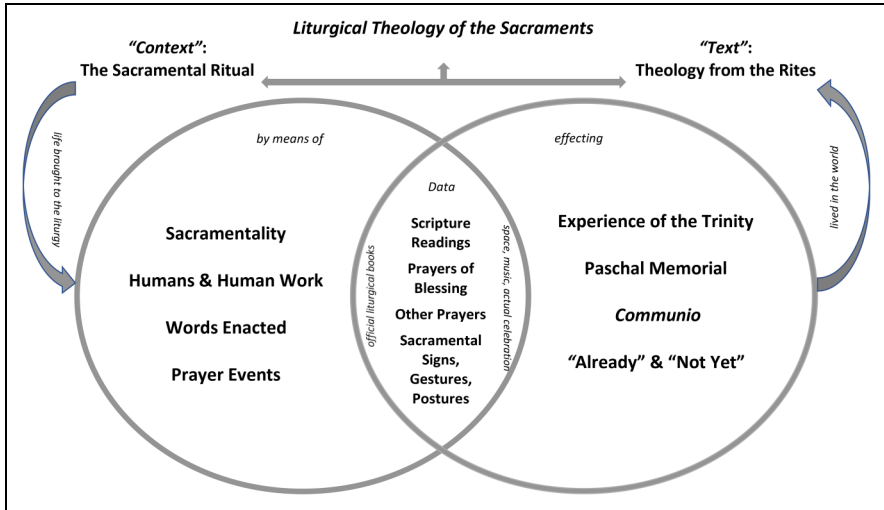


Figure 3. Diagramming Irwin’s infra-method. Again, the overlapping circles do not represent separate domains as in a Venn diagram. Similarities to Irwin’s meta-method are clear, as one would expect given the infra-method is in essence a more specific application of the meta-method.

is brought to bear on constructing a “theology from the rites” effected through the liturgy in terms of

- experience of the Trinity
- paschal memorial
- *communio*
- “already” and “not yet.”

4. Turning the Critical Edge

In Irwin’s method, the interplay of contexts and texts in liturgical celebration brings out—sometimes eye-opening, sometimes expected—theological themes expressed in the rite and (and one can hope) appropriated by the gathered assembly. The theological lenses Irwin utilizes (doxological theology/spirituality/ecumenism and experiences of the Trinity/paschal memorial/*communio*/"already" and "not yet") let the theologian draw out useful details about the celebration and help in providing critique where the liturgy (at least from this patristic + post-Conciliar perspective) might have done better, be that in the actual celebration or in the ritual “script.”

Are emergent theological themes and revisions to official rituals adequate reason to undertake liturgical theology, however? Here, the question that seems most pertinent is “so what?” What is the use of this sort of liturgical-theological reflection? Certainly, it is interesting (at least to theologians and liturgical scholars) to plumb the depth of meaning manifested by Christian ritualizing. But Irwin would surely see this as an

insufficient reason for doing liturgical theology. *What matters is what flows from the experience of the liturgy for life and theology.*

The insights of liturgical-theological analysis have serious, often practical, implications, and here is where Irwin's infra-method flows back into his meta-method. Looking into the "theology of liturgy" ("context is text" / *lex orandi*) must lead to "theology and spirituality derived from the liturgy" ("text shapes context" / *lex credendi*). This dialectic between context and text radiates insights to inform the life of the church, of a particular ritual tradition, of a local community, and of each baptized person (*lex vivendi*). Indeed, the format of *The Sacraments* makes it clear that such is Irwin's aim; each chapter ends with questions for discussion, denoting the book's formative thrust, and more than one chapter has a section called "Agenda in/for Life,"⁷⁶ clarifying the usefulness of the preceding liturgical-theological reflection for lived spirituality. Far from being simply an academic exercise, liturgical theology done the Irwin way has multiple edges that pry into life for the sake of its transformation and conversion—to become ever more Christ:

- **Ritual efficacy:** enhanced intra-church understanding of what sacramental liturgies do and how they do it.
- **Ecumenism:** enhanced potential for inter-church mutual understanding of the theology inherent to and expressed in diverse liturgical traditions.
- **Doxological theology:** all liturgy is in praise of God, liturgical celebration is the/a primary expression of what Christians believe, and thus theology derived from the liturgy should/must inform other branches of theology.
- **Spirituality:** liturgy shapes spirituality and having basic skills in liturgical-theological reflection can empower the believer to unearth the liturgy's riches for the sake of deepening their spirituality.
- **Mystagogy:** the fruits of liturgical-theological work provide supremely effective material for ongoing formation.
- **Ars celebrandi / lex agendi:** understanding the power of liturgy to express doctrine, shape spirituality, and inform life makes plain how essential it is to take care in the preparation and celebration of liturgical rites.
- **Liturgical reform:** when held up against fundamental theological themes, ecclesiastical norms, conciliar principles, effectiveness in actual celebration, and liturgical tradition/history, our official rites reveal their flaws and point us toward what needs to be revised, improved, or constructed. "Flaws" pertain not only to poorly crafted prayers, bad translation, and dissonance in liturgical genre, but also and more importantly to entire ritual structures and even to the efficaciousness of ancient forms in present-day cultures and contexts. As the Second Vatican Council envisioned, liturgical reform and renewal is never-ending, and fresh liturgical forms emerge. The liturgy must always be both ancient and new.

76. Ibid., 227, 247.

5. Conclusion: The Boundaries of Irwin's Method

In the final analysis, if undertaken from the broadest possible perspective, several key insights underly *Context and Text*. One might also call these insights aspects Irwin would see as essential to any liturgical-theological method, not just his own.

- (a) All aspects of liturgical celebration should be intrinsic to liturgical theological reflection.
- (b) Knowing what to pay attention to is key.
- (c) Knowing how various aspects function and relate to one another is essential.
- (d) Method really depends on questions and goals⁷⁷ and, thus, Irwin's method is an appropriate starting point; whatever the method, a liturgical theologian must pay attention to context(s).

The choice of an appropriate method depends upon the question or context under consideration. If this is the case, then, what Irwin offers is a deeply astute response to the needs of liturgical theology. In short, Irwin places a map before the liturgical theologian: decide upon your questions, then (and only then) think about which method(s) would be most likely to give you useful answers to those questions. Finally, *pay attention to questions and context*, no matter the method in use.

In *Context and Text*, Irwin accomplishes liturgical theology in three dimensions.

- First, the book as a whole is itself a work of liturgical theology presenting a theology of the liturgy through the lenses of history, present-day rites, and ongoing liturgical reform, with implications for Christian living.
- Second, he presents a method for doing liturgical theology—one that allows for liturgical-theological reflection upon any liturgical rite. By means of this method, one can take any liturgical rite as the object for analysis, focusing again on his variously expressed “lenses” or “contexts,” and drawing out implications for future practice and the ongoing interplay of *lex orandi*, *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi*. A ritual as a unified *complexus* can be considered, as can a specific element of a ritual—but in either case the analysis is a kind of meta-analysis that reveals what officially promulgated rites put forward as the proper form of celebration, how these “rites and texts” theoretically work in practice, how they interact with tradition, history, and principles of liturgical celebration, and, finally, what all of this might reveal in terms of needs for ongoing liturgical reform.

77. Cf. Michael A. Cantrell, “Must a Scholar of Religion be Methodologically Atheistic or Agnostic?” *JAAR* 84.2 (2016) 396: “‘My purpose here is not to teach the method that everyone ought to follow in order to conduct his reason well, but merely to show how I have tried to conduct my own’ (quoting Descartes, *Discourse on Method and Meditations on First Philosophy*).... For the reality is that scholarship is always shaped by basic, unverifiable commitments [or questions] of some sort, even if those commitments are usually implicit or unconsciously held.”

- Third, ultimately Irwin's is indeed a method, but it is also a methodological framework as Joyce Ann Zimmerman suggests.⁷⁸ Within this framework, the liturgical theologian can take up additional supplementary methodologies based upon their motivating questions or the aspects of the ritual they wish to explore. If the goal is to explore the theology of various chants of the Mass, for example, musicological methodologies would be essential supplements to Irwin's method.⁷⁹ If the appropriated theology of an actual celebration of a liturgical rite at a particular time in a particular place with a particular group of people is the object of analysis, then supplemental methods are required (e.g., ethnography, participant-observer analysis, reader-response criticism), as Irwin's method does not allow for such analysis beyond critique of enactment in light of official requirements and principles. To be sure, this intermittent need for supplemental methods is not a weakness in Irwin's method. No method can accomplish all things, and, indeed, Irwin's vehement assertion that every dimension of liturgical celebration must be considered in the doing of liturgical theology seems to presume the need for (or at least the possibility of) additional if not innumerable methods. Indeed, if pressed to say whether Irwin's is a *method* or a *framework*, I might stray and call it rather a *model*.⁸⁰

5.1 The Bounds and Evolution of the Lex Orandi

Irwin says that:

liturgy is primarily an *act of theology* through which we enter into the otherness of the infinite and transcendent God through the very human means of texts and rites, words and gestures, speech and symbolic action, all involving the body and the human senses.⁸¹

And that:

The church's decisions about what words, rites, symbols, and gestures to use matter a great deal since they comprise the church's rule of faith, its *lex orandi*.⁸²

These two statements create a fruitful dialectic or tension, in that on the one hand we must avoid deviation from the official rites, and on the other hand if the official rites fail to

78. Joyce Ann Zimmerman, *Liturgy and Hermeneutics* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1999) 88.

79. One example of utilizing Irwin's method as the basis for crafting a context-specific method with additional modes of engaging with the liturgical-theological data is found in Jason J. McFarland, *Announcing the Feast: The Entrance Song in the Mass of the Roman Rite* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2012). The book is a work in which liturgical history and musicology inform a specific liturgical-theological method.

80. Another of Irwin's important works in the domain of liturgical-sacramental theology, originally published in 2005 with a second edition in 2020, is his *Models of the Eucharist* (New York; Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press).

81. Irwin, *Context and Text*, rev. ed., 63.

82. *Ibid.*

let us “enter” then they need reform. One reason Irwin maintains the boundary between official and enacted liturgy is a concern for theological quality control (even orthodoxy), and a recognition that poorly celebrated liturgy can in a sense deform the official rite and make it communicate something unintended. Still, the only theology ever communicated within the liturgical assembly is the theology of the rite as enacted somewhere and sometime, which Irwin’s method can only tangentially explore.⁸³ We can surely admit, however, the possibility and usefulness of theological reflection on liturgical sources outside of the context of an actual here-and-now “eventing” of the ritual. This is what Irwin calls the “theology of liturgy” and what could perhaps be called a “systematic liturgical theology,” which then leads to further reflection or “theology drawn from the liturgy.”

The key to understanding Irwin’s method is understanding his starting point. Or, to put it another way, for Irwin, *what is liturgical theology and how should liturgical theology be undertaken?* The official “rites and texts” are and must be the subject of liturgical theology for Irwin. This stance circumscribes the possible data for liturgical-theological reflection. It also tells us about the *should* inherent in his method: the official “rites and texts” (as the present-day manifestation of the ancient liturgical tradition, as a *complexus* comprised of multiple and inter-related genres of texts/rituals/symbols/arts, as grounded in the principles of the Vatican II liturgical reform, as promulgated by the Holy See thus becoming official and normative, and as subject to ongoing reform based in the insights and critique resulting from properly executed liturgical-theological reflection) really *have to be* the subject because—for all the reasons above and from Irwin’s coherent vision of liturgical theology—they constitute the living *lex orandi* of the Church.

Of course, one might take different starting points to the doing of liturgical theology. Irwin would probably think this diversity of methods a good and necessary thing and welcome supplementary methods that help to achieve the overall goals of his method or model. Still, at least for traditions with officially promulgated liturgical books, he would likely say the rites and texts therein comprise the most important and relevant data to the liturgical-theological endeavor.⁸⁴ The coherence and inherent circumscription of Irwin’s method make it particularly useful, sound, and manageable; at the same time its starting point might make it less useful or even not of use for liturgical traditions with an improvisatory mode of corporate worship.

83. In other words, the method can explore what should be happening at 10 a.m. on Sunday in storied St. Augustine’s Catholic Church in Washington, DC, and it can tell us how the rite might need to be reformed to allow for the “should” to happen. It cannot tell us what is actually happening, however, or discern what, theologically and ritually speaking, the assembly has appropriated through their participation in the liturgy, which in some way shapes the *lex orandi*.

84. It is important to note that the boundaries of what is “official” varies from tradition to tradition, and in some traditions even improvised rites might be official. Still, all Christian rites inescapably draw from the ancient, living and evolving liturgical tradition. Geldhof admonishes that “liturgical theologians should never look down on ‘text’.” *Liturgical Theology as a Research Program*, 16.

5.2 Future Directions and Open Questions

While each of the following open questions requires further explication beyond the limits of this article, Irwin's method raises many questions, which need to be addressed in future scholarship to continue Geldhof's "daring" and "clarity" that inspired this article in the first place.

- In looking only to liturgical enactment in the abstract and privileging the official "rites and texts" in doing liturgical theology, is there a conflation of what constitutes the *lex orandi* and *lex credendi*? From a certain perspective, the liturgy could be viewed as simply another collection of texts that communicate doctrine. Is it the performative potential of the "rites and texts" that make them live outside the *lex credendi*? The *lex orandi* has authority insofar as it actually manifests in local liturgical celebrations. We could ask, does the *orandi* even exist outside of enactment? From another hyperbolic perspective, however, if we take the example of poorly performed liturgy that fails to communicate what the "rites and texts" intend and, thus, fails to activate the *lex vivendi*, can said local celebration be deemed as authentically constituting the *lex orandi*?
- What happens if we open up the development and interpretation of both *lex orandi* and *lex credendi* to the hyper-local interpretive context?⁸⁵ And, what is the most effective (and efficient) way to discern appropriated liturgical theology? That is, a liturgical theology produced through a multi-year participant-observer analysis can glean crucial insights, but not every work in local liturgical theology can take such time.
- How can liturgical theology's critical dimension or "edge," as the methodological tool by which "rites and texts" are continually renewed and reformed, actually bear fruit? Liturgical reform: how does it happen, how is it meant to happen, what solutions might there be to the current quagmire in which the post-conciliar "rites and texts" seem to have become again immutable? Indeed, a liturgical theology of liturgical reform is urgently needed, not just in the academy but for the ongoing vitality of the liturgical life of the church.⁸⁶
- Would a source-critical dimension add something to Irwin's method? For example, is the history of a prayer, its original sources, its evolution over time or history of revision relevant to a liturgical theology?
- Clearly, music comprises part of the official "rites and texts"—namely, chant—contained in official liturgical books. As such, it seems a liturgical-theological method needs to have a means of interpreting both melody and text. How? Can music *qua* music communicate a theology and shape the *lex credendi*?⁸⁷ Are official (often ancient) melodies as authoritative as official (often ancient) prayers?

85. For a move in this direction, see Layla A. Karst, "Mirror of the Church: Liturgy as Ecclesial Self-Recognition," *Proceedings of the North American Academy of Liturgy* (2022) 71–83.

86. An important work in this vein includes that of Johan te Velde, for example, "What Problems Did the Liturgical Reform Intend to Remedy," *Questions Liturgiques* 98 (2017) 81–101.

87. See Jennifer Wakeling, "Divine Resonance: Meaning-Making via Instrumental Music in Christian Worship" (PhD diss., The Australian Catholic University, 2019); McFarland, *Announcing the Feast*; and, among several of her works on liturgy and music, Dorothea

- Irwin frequently uses the word “constitutive” to speak of the indispensable parts of a liturgical rite. The word implies that there are non-constitutive elements of liturgy and non-constitutive implications (or effects) of liturgical enactment. In the doing of liturgical theology this is an important distinction that probably must remain, but it is also potentially problematic: that some things matter more than others is clear, but who makes or has made the distinction and what voices are and have been censored out of the process of discerning what is constitutive?⁸⁸ If some parts are more important than others, does the same apply to persons?⁸⁹


5.3 Context is Key

Irwin’s most important insight is that context is the “text” we read when “doing liturgical theology.” This context is in many ways universal, but at the same time and paradoxically only local. Irwin’s method is rightly paradoxical, too, in that it is firmly situated in both the never-ending process of liturgical reform while, at the same time, in officially promulgated and (for a time at least) unchangeable rites. The method also achieves a dialectic between the universal and local. The living history of local Christian liturgical praxis shaped and shapes the *lex credendi* of the universal church, which in turn shepherds it within the bounds of orthodoxy.

While Irwin’s method flows from his Roman Catholic context, and his own “doing” of liturgical theology is concerned with Roman Catholic liturgy, he is also clearly influenced by concern for ecumenism and the ecumenical thrust of liturgical studies, liturgical reform, and liturgical theology in general. His balancing of liturgy as event and liturgy as tradition makes his method complicated (i.e., it is quite difficult to outline the method step by step), but this complexity is honest and, without question, what liturgical theology grounded in the principles of the liturgical reform (with its aim of renewing tradition for present-day communities) requires.

The careful dissection and critique of Irwin’s method presented here is one step along the way to future clarity regarding method in liturgical theology. Recalling Joris Geldhof’s call for daring in this task can provide inspiration to those willing to undertake it, and looking to this analysis, we hope, can inspire other liturgical theologians to examine, delineate, and test a variety of existing and yet to be developed methods. Such work is crucial in this era in which normative modes of liturgical participation are inching toward the metaverse, and in which a sacramental world view is greatly diminished. As always, doing liturgical theology is and must be a creative task.

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Haspelmath-Finatti, “Ordained and Baptized Ministries through the Lens of Liturgical Singing,” *Roczniki Teologiczne* 69.8 (2022) 41–51.

88. See the work of luminary Margaret Mary Kelleher on liturgical theology and censorship.

89. See, for example, Stephen Burns and Bryan Cones, eds., *Liturgy with a Difference: Beyond Inclusion in the Christian Assembly* (London: SCM Press, 2019).

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