

Zeitschrift: Internationale kirchliche Zeitschrift : neue Folge der Revue internationale de théologie
Band: 108 (2018)
Heft: 3-4

Artikel: Meeting Christ in the church : church and Eucharist as the "body of Christ" in the theology of Robert W. Jenson
Autor: Runhaar, Louis C.
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-939235>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften auf E-Periodica. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. Das Veröffentlichen von Bildern in Print- und Online-Publikationen sowie auf Social Media-Kanälen oder Webseiten ist nur mit vorheriger Genehmigung der Rechteinhaber erlaubt. [Mehr erfahren](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. La reproduction d'images dans des publications imprimées ou en ligne ainsi que sur des canaux de médias sociaux ou des sites web n'est autorisée qu'avec l'accord préalable des détenteurs des droits. [En savoir plus](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. Publishing images in print and online publications, as well as on social media channels or websites, is only permitted with the prior consent of the rights holders. [Find out more](#)

Download PDF: 09.08.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

Meeting Christ in the church.

Church and Eucharist as the “body of Christ” in the theology of Robert W. Jenson

Louis C. Runhaar

1. Introduction

Arguably, there are no less than four objects that the church denotes with the words ‘the body of Christ’.¹ On the one hand these words refer to the historical Jesus of Nazareth, to whom the crucifix ‘body’ refers. On the other hand, these same words also signify the resurrected body of the Lord in heaven; the body which, after his resurrection, is sometimes recognized by his followers and sometimes not. Then there is the sacred Eucharistic bread that since the dawn of Christianity has been referred to as the ‘body of Christ’. Such words are heard on a weekly or even daily basis in Eucharistic prayers and resound again and again with each individual receiving communion. Finally, ‘body of Christ’ language is used as a synonym for the community of the church, a synonym that is just as much loved as it is argued about.

When a term is used for so many different objects, there are two possibilities: either it is an empty and meaningless term, or the designated objects relate to each other more than one might think at first glance. Here, I want to consider the second possibility. I do this on the basis of the work of the American Lutheran theologian, Robert W. Jenson, who considers this theme at length in his sacramental theology. He does so in a way that is experienced by some as surprisingly Catholic, but by others (including some Catholics) as transgressive. In this essay I seek in part to explore the extent to which Jenson’s vision of the relationship between the historical, the risen, the ecclesial and the sacramental ‘body of Christ’ may contribute to the Old Catholic theological concepts of church and Eucharist.

¹ The original Dutch essay was written in 2014 as an examination piece for systematic theology at the Old Catholic Seminary in Utrecht. Many thanks to my friend and “brother in ministry”, Dr Hector M. Patmore (Cardiff, United Kingdom; since 2017 Jerusalem, Israel), for correcting my translation of an earlier version of this essay and for providing some very helpful remarks.

Robert William Jenson (1930–2017) was an American clergyman, theologian and expert on ecumenism, who belonged to the Evangelical Lutheran Church of America (ELCA), a church in full ecclesial communion with (among others) the American Episcopal Church (ECUSA). Of Norwegian ancestry, but American by birth, born in the town of Eau Claire in Wisconsin, Jenson studied and lectured in the United States (St. Paul, Gettysburg, Northfield and Princeton), in Germany (Heidelberg) and in the United Kingdom (Oxford). For a long time he was known as a “Barthian with a sharp Lutheran edge”,² but this changed with his encounters with Anglicanism and after he started to engage with Roman Catholic and Orthodox theologians, including Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Urs von Balthasar as well as Vladimir Lossky and John Zizioulas. In the 1970s and 1980s Jenson was involved in American Episcopalian-Lutheran dialogue, and as an advisor to the Lutheran-Roman Catholic dialogue. In the United States, he was known as a connoisseur of the Calvinist Puritan Jonathan Edwards (1703–1758), in whose radical Christological interpretation of God he saw many similarities with his own type of Christology, which is sometimes referred to as ‘Alexandrian’, the early ecclesiastical theological movement that is characterized by its teaching of a strong union of the divine and human nature of Christ. The pinnacle of Jenson’s theological work was his two-volume *Systematic Theology* (Volume 1: 1997; Volume 2: 1999). In 1991 he founded, together with his friend Carl Braaten, the Center for Catholic and Evangelical Theology and the theological journal *Pro Ecclesia*. After his retirement in 1998 from St. Olaf College, Northfield, Minnesota, he took up a position as Senior Scholar for Research at the Center for Theological Inquiry in Princeton, New Jersey, a post from which he retired in 2007. He died at his home in Princeton on 5 September 2017.

I begin this essay with a general outline of Jenson’s theology, then I focus on his perception of the Eucharist and the church as the body of Christ, arriving at an assessment of it from Old Catholic perspective. With regard to the sacraments, this essay is limited to the ‘Sacrament of the Altar’. In considering Jenson’s theology, I shall confine myself to a discus-

² Carl Braaten, ‘Robert William Jenson – A Personal Memoir’, in: Colin E. Gunton et al. (eds), *Trinity, Time & Church, a Response to the Theology of Robert Jenson* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), 4.

sion of his *Systematic Theology*.³ However, the same line of thought can be found in *Essays in Theology of Culture*,⁴ in the extensive essay 'The Church and the Sacraments',⁵ and in the essay 'Christ and Culture 1: Christ as Polity'.⁶

2. A temporally structured concept of God

The key dimensions of Jenson's theology are located in the doctrine of the triune God and his theological interpretation of the relationship between God and the created order. Jenson's ecclesiology and sacramentology are not appendices, but an integral part of his theological vision. Jenson's theology is not a hierarchical structure; it is rather a network in which all the 'nodes' are connected to each other. Characteristic of Jenson's theology is his temporally structured concept of God. For Jenson, what takes place in salvation history of Exodus and Resurrection is constitutive of the being of God. This temporally structured concept of God is rooted systematically in Jenson's view of the figure of Christ, which we can rather simplistically describe as follows: the second person of the Trinity is (also) the man Jesus of Nazareth. What takes place in his life, death and resurrection, determines the nature of God as triune because this first century Israelite is the Christ, the Son of God; the second *hypostasis* of the Trinity.

In this way the history of salvation becomes the scene of a very exciting accumulation of events in which the survival of the cosmos – indeed, the very existence of God – is at stake. What would have happened, Jenson asks,⁷ if Pharaoh had stood his ground? What would have happened if Jesus had capitulated in the desert or in the Garden of Olives? Jenson challenges the reader of the Bible to take these stories really seriously. Persons waving their dogmatic textbooks and turning up with concepts

³ Robert W. Jenson, *Systematic Theology, Volume 1: The Triune God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); idem, *Systematic Theology, Volume 2: The Works of God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁴ Robert W. Jenson, *Essays in Theology of Culture* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

⁵ Robert W. Jenson, 'The Church and the Sacraments', in: Colin E. Gunton et. al. (eds), *The Cambridge Companion to Christian Doctrine* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 207–225.

⁶ Robert W. Jenson, 'Christ and Culture 1: Christ as Polity', in: *International Journal of Systematic Theology* 5 (2003) 323–329.

⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 48.

like *omnipotentia*, *omniscientia*, *immutabilitas* and *consubstantialitas* spoil the story. As Jenson says:

The Bible's language about God is drastically personal: he changes his mind and reacts to external events, he makes threats and repents of them, he makes promises and tricks us by how he fulfills them. If we understand this language as fundamentally inappropriate, as 'anthropomorphic', we do not know the biblical God.⁸

This provocative quotation demonstrates the primacy of scriptural narrative in Jenson's theology. The dogmas of the church should not dictate the story of the Gospel.⁹ Methodologically, Jenson's approach corresponds to the postliberal and narrative theology of the so-called Yale school, a late-twentieth century theological movement which understands the Christian faith as a culture and a language in which doctrines (especially the creeds) are likened to a 'depth grammar' for the first-order language and culture. In this understanding, the church is historically shaped by the continuous, regulated reading of the scriptural narrative over time.¹⁰ This narrative approach provides Jenson with the instruments to put forward his specific, eschatological-pneumatological theology. He speaks of the "eschatological character of the gospel's plot line"¹¹ that illustrates his theological method in which linguistic and dramaturgical terminology, such as protagonist, coherence, plot and *dramatis personae*, play a major role. Just as a story or a play is determined by the outcome, so the identity of God is, according to Jenson, determined by the *eschaton*: "The Lord's self-identity is constituted in dramatic coherence, it is established not from the beginning but from the end [...] not in *persistence*, but in *anticipation* [...]. He is eternally himself in that he unrestrictedly anticipates an end in which he will be all he ever could be."¹² This is the reason why the concept of promise plays such an important role in Jenson's thinking: "the future that moves the story is available ahead of time in materially specific prom-

⁸ Ibid., 222.

⁹ Ibid., 48.

¹⁰ However Scott R. Swain points out in his book *The God of the Gospel. Jenson's Trinitarian Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2013), 68, that "it is (primarily) German systematic theology after Barth [...] that provides the most immediate context for and the closest analogy to Jenson's theological program. Indeed, if conceptual dependence is traceable [...] it is Fuchs and not Frei who is responsible".

¹¹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology I* (as note 3), 159.

¹² Ibid., 66.

ises of its coming.”¹³ The Holy Spirit functions in Jenson’s theology as the futurity of God.¹⁴ And as ‘futurity’, Jenson brings the Holy Spirit frequently to the stage as intratrinitarian liberator:

The Spirit is the liveliness of the divine life because he is the power of the divine future [...] the Spirit liberates the Father from himself to be in fact fatherly, to be the actual *archè* of the deity [...] the Spirit proceeds from the Father as himself to be the possibility of such processions, his own and the Son’s.¹⁵

A concise summary of Jenson’s view of God as Trinity is offered by the Eastern Orthodox philosophical theologian David Bentley Hart, who has engaged extensively with Jenson’s thought, and whose assessment of it is both admiring and critical:

God’s eternity is intrinsically temporal, however much that temporality may transcend the fragmentary successiveness by which the days of the creatures are measured. [...] The Father, for Jenson, is the *whence* of the divine life, the Spirit the *whither* and the Son the *present* in which the divine past and divine future hold together in one life and identity.¹⁶

It is therefore impossible in Jenson’s theology to speak about God separately from broken human reality and the ambiguities of human stories, a history and reality which is represented by the story of Jesus of Nazareth. In describing the intratrinitarian relations of difference, Jenson can for example affirm: “The Son [...] is not only God but as God also a creature [...]. In his very different way as Jesus of Nazareth [the Son] stands over against the Father and the Spirit.”¹⁷ For Jenson there is no other “God the Son” than Jesus of Nazareth. Therefore he wants to have nothing to do with the notion of a *logos asarkos*, an “unincarnate *Logos*, lurking somehow before or behind or beyond Jesus the Son.”¹⁸ Jenson refuses to think of the pre-existence of the Son in the eternal life of God without the incarnation, because “the triune God’s eternity is precisely the infinity of the *life* that the Son, who is Jesus the Christ, lives with his Father in their Spirit.”¹⁹

¹³ Ibid., 67.

¹⁴ Ibid., 219.

¹⁵ Ibid., 158.

¹⁶ *First Things*, October 2005 (my emphasis) <https://www.firstthings.com/article/2005/10/the-lively-god-of-robert-jenson> (accessed on 02.03.2018).

¹⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology I* (as note 3), 157.

¹⁸ Ibid., 142.

¹⁹ Ibid., 141.

According to Jenson the key to the proper understanding of the pre-existence of the Son is to be found in the way the Old and the New Testament relate to each other: “In the full narrative of Scripture we see how the Son indeed precedes his human birth without being simply unincarnate: the Son appears as a narrative pattern of Israel’s created human story before he can appear as an individual Israelite within that story.” That is, for Jenson there is “a pattern of movement within the event of the Incarnation, the movement to incarnation, as itself a pattern of God’s triune life.”²⁰ The incarnation should therefore be understood in a broad sense, including the history that precedes that moment in which Mary is overshadowed by the Holy Spirit. Likewise, Jenson argues that the “Word” in the Prologue to the Gospel of John (1:1–18), should not be understood as some sort of divine entity that has not yet become the ‘created’ – i.e., begotten – person of the Gospels:

In the Gospel so introduced we find this Word testifying to the mode of his preexistence: before Abraham was, I am [John 8:58]. It is precisely the aggressively incarnate protagonist of this Gospel’s narrative who says this of himself.²¹

Jenson says unequivocally that God *is* as he reveals himself in the history of salvation in Jesus Christ. In his theology, therefore, there is no distinction whatsoever between the ‘economic’ Trinity and the ‘immanent’ Trinity: “God is what happens between Jesus and his Father in their Spirit.”²²

3. The body of Christ

Precisely because Jenson can call the Spirit-filled man Jesus of Nazareth “Christ”, “Word of God” and “Son of God”, he can also speak about the lived fellowship of the church, and about the “earthly” mysteries that take place in her midst with bread and wine, oil, and water. Jenson even suggests that the earthly church and the earthly ceremony of the Eucharist are “the gate of heaven”, or more straightforwardly “heaven”.²³ For those who are familiar with the lived reality of the church, these words may appear somewhat shocking: the church and its liturgies may be inspirational, but

²⁰ Ibid., 141.

²¹ Ibid., 139.

²² Ibid., 221. On the relation between the economic and the immanent Trinity, see Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 173.

²³ See *ibid.*, 172. 184. 196. 222.

hardly “heavenly” we might well say. Yet Jenson does not shy away from such terminology, because for him the actual lived sociological phenomenon that is “church” designates the actual and lived human community that is united to Christ, a community together with the risen Jesus Christ, the “whole Christ.”²⁴

To understand how a communion, together with the risen Jesus Christ, can form “the whole Christ” we must first recognise that Jenson understands the resurrection as an eschatological event. For this, he goes back to the apostle Paul, who describes his encounters with the risen Lord in apocalyptic terms of revelation (*apokalypsis*): “It [...] seems to be Paul’s understanding that what he and the other witnesses saw was of the same eschatological character as what Zechariah or Daniel or the postcanonical apocalypsists saw, that is, the fulfilled future of creation.”²⁵ The same applies to the Gospels, where it becomes clear that the apparitions of the Risen Lord, however visible and tangible, do not mean a return to the situation prior to his death. In the short period of his post-resurrection appearances, Jesus Christ dwelt, according to Jenson, “in the heaven of the apocalypses, that is, in God’s final future, from which he showed himself – or the Spirit showed him – to the chosen.”²⁶ In Jenson’s theology “heaven” means the Spirit-mediated anticipatory presence of the *eschaton* in the present reality: “the created future’s presence – as future! – with God.”²⁷ In other words: “Heaven is where God takes space in his creation to be present to the whole of it.”²⁸

The resurrection does not mean that Christ has ‘disappeared’ into the *eschaton*, or that he, except through certain appearances, has become physically inaccessible to the faithful. Jenson again appeals to Paul when he identifies the body of the Risen Lord with the church and the Eucharist:

The same apostolic theologian who taught that Christ’s risen home is the heaven of the apocalypses does in fact speak of the risen Christ’s body. Although Paul clearly thinks of the Lord as in some sense visibly located in a heaven spatially related to the rest of creation, the only body to which Paul

²⁴ *Totus Christus* is a phrase used by Augustine; it stands for Christ united with his church. Cf. Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 81; *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 167.

²⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 196.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 197.

²⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 121.

²⁸ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 206; cf. Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 121.

ever actually refers is not an entity in this heaven, but the Eucharist's loaf and cup and the church assembled around them.²⁹

But how then should we understand this? A piece of bread, a chalice filled with wine or a group of people do not look, after all, like a human body. Many believers and theologians understand these words therefore as a metaphor. Jenson, however, believes that we seriously undermine Paul's argument in his letters to the Romans and the Corinthians if we consider his words about the body of Christ as a mere figure of speech, rather than as a concept, or a proposition:

We have been baptized into it [...] and what we have been baptized into is simply 'Christ'. Again, we are 'one body' in that we do something that can be equivalently described as 'sharing in the body of Christ' and 'partaking of the one bread'.³⁰

It is clear that the church and the Eucharist as the body of Christ are not organisms of the species *homo sapiens*. According to Jenson, "body" in Paul's thought (which term he believes is not inhibited by our contemporary biological understanding of the body³¹) stands for "the person's availability to other persons and thereupon to him or herself."³² The church and the Eucharist are therefore the places where the risen Christ is personally available. That is, they are places where he can be met and addressed as the Risen Lord.

Where am I to aim my intention, to intend the risen Christ? The first answer must be: to the assembled church, and if I am in that assembly, to the gathering around me. Thus the primal posture of Christian prayer is not involution with closed eyes, but an open posture, with eyes intent upon those speaking for the gathering.³³

For Jenson, the Eucharist and the church are body of Christ in an anticipatory manner. The head of the body is already in the heaven of God's future.

The church exists in and by anticipation. God's one 'people' cannot gather in this world before the last day; therefore the church can now be the people of God only in anticipation [...]. The church is the 'body' of that Christ whose

²⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 204.

³⁰ Ibid., 205.

³¹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 212.

³² Ibid., and see also *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 205.

³³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 213.

bodily departure to God's right hand his disciples once witnessed and whose return in such fashion we must still await. The church is the 'temple' of that Spirit whose very reality among us is 'foretaste' or 'down payment'.³⁴

An anticipatory mode of existence, although provisional in nature, is for Jenson no less real: "For it is what creatures may anticipate from God that is their being."³⁵ The Holy Spirit here is the 'operator' who unites head and body: "The Spirit is the *arrabon* of the community."³⁶ This explains the great emphasis that Jenson places on the *epiclesis* in the Eucharistic prayer: "The elements and the community around them have to be freed [by the Spirit] from their merely historical reality if they are to be the body of the risen and coming One."³⁷

In the above, I described the church and the Eucharist as the body of Christ, but how do they relate to each other? Does the church determine the Eucharist or does the Eucharist determine the church? Jenson chooses the second approach: "The church is [the risen body of Christ] because the bread and cup in the congregation's midst is the very same body of Christ."³⁸ Through participation in the Eucharist the community has its communal identity in its midst as an (external) object of faith. The church community manifests/incarnates/represents the availability of Christ be-

³⁴ Ibid., 172.

³⁵ Ibid. In her discussion of Jenson's ecclesiology, Susan Wood appears not to grasp the sacramental (pneumatological and eschatological) character of his thinking on the subject. "I fear that he often makes this identification too directly. In his theology the church risks becoming a prolongation of the incarnation in a way that *Lumen Gentium* tries to avoid.": Susan Wood, 'Robert Jenson's ecclesiology from a Roman Catholic Perspective', in: Gunton et al. (eds), *Trinity, Time & Church* (as note 5), 178–187: 182. In reality, Jenson is very explicit about this: "The church's present reality anticipates, in all brokenness and fallibility, the end of all things, exactly as the end is the Trinity's embrace of 'all in all'": Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 222; and "The church now possesses the Lord *sacramentally*, that is, actually and truly, but still in faith, not by 'sight'": Ibid., 334. It is important also to bear in mind that Jenson defines 'faith' as "the eschatological mode of existence": Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 167.

³⁶ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 222.

³⁷ Ibid., 227.

³⁸ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 205. Jenson's interpretation of Paul is strongly reminiscent of the Eucharistic vision offered by Augustine in his famous sermon 272: "If you, therefore, are Christ's body and members, it is your own mystery that is placed on the Lord's table! It is your own mystery that you are receiving!": Early Church Texts, online at http://www.earlychurchtexts.com/public/augustine_sermon_272_eucharist.htm (accessed 10.06.2018).

cause the presence and consumption of bread and wine in her midst manifests/incarnates/represents the same availability of Christ which constitute its unity.

The church *is* the body of Christ for the world and for her members, in that she is constituted a community by the verbal and visible presence *to* her of that same body of Christ. The body of Christ is at once his sacramental presence within the church's assembly to make that assembly a community, and is the church-community herself for the world and her members.³⁹

The difficulty, I suggest, is that this is a relation without analogies. If this were not the case, then the nature of church and Eucharist as body of Christ would be an instance of a general principle. Jenson will have none of this: "The usual metaphysics suppose that what can be and what cannot be are determined by abstract universal principles and never by a particular."⁴⁰ Jenson does not want "Greek pagan thinkers" to dictate what can and what cannot be possible. Instead of, for example, explaining Christ's presence in bread and wine with the aid of philosophical concepts, Jenson focusses upon the one who says: "Take, eat, this is my body." In Jenson's theology it is precisely the specific human person Jesus who is the "material determinant" of what is or is not possible. Jenson seeks "to interpret the being of a particular person, the risen Jesus" so as to "truly say of him that he is 'really present' as the eucharistic elements, or that he 'speaks' when the Scriptures are read in the midst of the people, or that he 're-presents' himself by an icon of the *Pantokrator*."⁴¹

Thus, according to Jenson, the Eucharist and the church are body of Christ for us because the Risen Christ is himself in these entities: "For the proposition that the church is a human body of the risen Jesus to be ontologically and straightforwardly true, all that is required is that Jesus is indeed the Logos of God, so that his self-understanding determines what is real."⁴² Furthermore: "The church is the risen Christ's Ego. And as he is the Word of God by which all things are created to be what they are, no further explanation of his eucharistic presence is needed or possible."⁴³ That Christ's body as church and Eucharist has an objectivity is for Jenson a prerequisite for a relationship of reciprocity between God and human-

³⁹ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 168.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 215.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 251.

⁴² Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 206.

⁴³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 215.

kind.⁴⁴ A reciprocal relationship can only exist when two subjects also want to be an object for the other.

Is God an object, can God be an object? That is, can he be in true and free converse with us? [...] As God addresses us, how do we find him to respond? Does God have a body? [...] But, of course, God has a body, the body born of Mary and risen into the church and its sacraments. When the disciples turned to the object Jesus, or when we turn to the object loaf and cup or bath or gathered community, we have precisely the body of God for our object.⁴⁵

Jenson believes that this possibility of knowledge of God consists in participation. That is to say, God takes us, in the church, that is, in Christ, up into his life and so also in the knowledge of himself,⁴⁶ the mutual knowledge of each other of Father, Son and Spirit.

When the Gospel of Christ's Resurrection is spoken by and heard in the church, it is the very word of the Father to the Son that we hear. When the church prays to the Father in the Son's name, she is taken into the obedient response of the Son to what the Father tells him. As the church speaks and hears the gospel and as the church responds in prayer and confession, the church's life is a great conversation and this conversation is none other than our participation in the converse of the Father and the Son in the Spirit. As the church is enlivened and empowered by this hearing and answer, this inspiration is by none other than that Spirit who is the life between the Father and the Son. So do we know God.⁴⁷

By the work of the Holy Spirit God is knowable and available in our reality in the church and in the Eucharist as the body of Christ. "He needs no other body to be a risen man, body and soul. There is and needs to be no other place than the church to be embodied, nor in that other place any other entity to be the 'real' body of Christ. Heaven is where God takes place in his creation to be present to the whole of it; he does that in the church."⁴⁸

What might all this mean from an Old Catholic perspective?

⁴⁴ Jenson derives his most important thoughts about this from Luther and Hegel; see *ibid.*, 214.

⁴⁵ Jenson, *Systematic Theology I* (as note 3), 228ff.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 227.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 228.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 206.

4. An evaluation from an Old Catholic perspective

In order to assess Jenson's possible contribution to Old Catholic theology, I look at some characteristics of his vision and relate these to Old Catholic theology. Like Old Catholic theology and the Old Catholic 'programme', Jenson's ecclesiology is "drenched" in ecumenical theology and the tradition of the undivided church of the first millennium.⁴⁹ Jenson deploys his theology to serve the restoration of the broken church community which he calls "doing theology for and even of the undivided church."⁵⁰ Whereas in an Old Catholic context recourse is often taken to the undivided church of the first ten centuries, before the Great Schism of 1054, in Jenson's theology the undivided church is primarily an *eschatological* entity. Jenson is consciously doing theology "in anticipation of the one church",⁵¹ because the church reaches its fullness only in the coming Kingdom. In comparison with the Old Catholic recourse to the undivided church, Jenson's approach has more hermeneutic and creative potential, because the undivided church of the *eschaton* has endlessly more imaginable (and perhaps also unimaginable) manifestations than the historically conditioned 'undivided' church of the first ten centuries.

Typical for Jenson's theology is the primacy of the scriptural narrative. This should probably be traced to German (Protestant) systematic theology after Barth;⁵² it certainly should not be taken as an example of a fundamentalist interpretation of the *sola scriptura* principle. The canon of Scripture is fundamental to the church for Jenson in the same way that, for example, the episcopate is fundamental to the church. The eschatological-pneumatological character of his theology makes it possible that some instances, even though they have gradually developed in the history of the church, nevertheless belong to its foundation.⁵³ The great importance that Jenson attaches to the narrative character of the gospel is arguably rooted in the forma-

⁴⁹ Cf. Declaration of Utrecht (1889), article 8, in: Urs von Arx/Maja Weyermann (eds), *Statut der Internationalen Altkatholischen Bischofskonferenz (IBK). Offizielle Ausgabe in fünf Sprachen* (Bern: Stämpfli, 2001), 57–59; 'A Preamble: The Ecclesiological Foundations of the Union of Utrecht', article 2, in: *ibid.*, 28.

⁵⁰ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), viii.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*

⁵² See footnote 10.

⁵³ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 238. Not everything that arises in the history of the church is normative. As conditions for "inalienability" Jenson notes necessity for the progress of the gospel and irreversibility.

tive role of Scripture in the liturgy of the church.⁵⁴ The primacy of the scriptural narrative in Jenson's theology appears therefore to be in harmony with the twentieth-century Catholic movement of *ressourcement*, which consists in a return to the tradition of the early church and its sources. For Old Catholic theology, however, Jenson's view of the appropriateness of biblical language and narratives when it comes to describing God and salvation history is probably too strict and in danger of historicist misrepresentation. If one considers active ecclesial *relation to* the narratives of Jesus and Israel in liturgy, ethical reflection, catechesis, art etc. as the actual locus of divine revelation, one is able to take the biblical narratives very seriously and at the same time maintain that its language about God is anthropomorphic, and therefore fundamentally inappropriate.

Another critical question addressed to Jenson would be whether his criticism of classical metaphysics, and his competing vision of Jesus Christ as "material determinant of what generally can and cannot be"⁵⁵ makes his theology incompatible on a fundamental level with traditional Catholic and Orthodox expressions of the faith. Is it possible to distance oneself with impunity from the (neo-)Platonic assumptions that have had a decisive influence on the formation of Christianity? To ask the same question in a more general manner: is 'Hellenized Christianity' to be regarded as a special and irreversible work of the Holy Spirit in the progress of the Gospel, or is this form of Christianity a more or less fortunate historical circumstance that may change alongside changes in a cultural and philosophical context?

Also, according to Jenson, a large part of Western theology tends to refuse the human nature of Christ its constitutive function in the way the Trinity is God.⁵⁶ Because of this, Jenson says, Western theology is not able to give a consistent account of the Catholic faith that the resurrected Jesus Christ is embodied here and now *in* the church and in the Eucharist *for* the church.⁵⁷ The alternative that Jenson offers should be seen as an attempt

⁵⁴ Ibid., 273.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 215.

⁵⁶ According to *ibid.*, 254; cf. Jenson, *Systematic Theology 1* (as note 3), 131, Western theology is following the interpretation of the Council of Chalcedon that is laid down in the *Tomus ad Flavianum* letter of Pope Leo I. This text paved the way for the Council of Chalcedon and was added to the decree of the Council as an authoritative interpretation thereof. In this text it is stated that each nature [that is: of Christ] is the doer or sufferer of only of what is naturally proper to it.

⁵⁷ Jenson, *Systematic Theology 2* (as note 3), 254.

to make Western ecclesiology and sacramentology ‘more Catholic’ in the sense of being better able to articulate how the human body of the risen Jesus Christ is available in the church and the Eucharist. This alternative stems from his ‘Alexandrian’ Christology, in which the human nature of Jesus Christ *does* play a constitutive role.

Finally, when it comes to the question of the *realis praesentia*, the focus in the Western Catholic tradition is on the ‘Sacrament of the Altar’. This also applies to Old Catholic theology, which belongs to this tradition. However, the strong ecclesiological character of Old Catholic theology offers a natural context in which, flowing forth from the Catholic faith in the Eucharist, the concrete human community of the church can *also* be considered as the place and object in which Jesus Christ is really present, both in body and in spirit. The theology of Robert Jenson gives a powerful impulse to this nascent insight.

5. Conclusion

The theology of Jenson must be counted among the ecclesiologies of ecumenical communion, amongst which the Old Catholic theology of the local church is a special form. His emphasis on the visibility of church and sacraments, in which baptism and the Eucharist occupy the main place, is very familiar to Old Catholic theologians. This also applies to his view of the sacramental nature of the church and the sacraments as pneumatological and eschatological identification with Christ. Such views will certainly find approval within more recent Old Catholic theology influenced by Eastern Orthodox thought.

The contribution of Jenson’s vision of the relationship between the historical, the risen, the ecclesial and the sacramental body of Christ is situated in the uniqueness, consistency and the biblical-theological character of his theology. Jenson gives an authentic interpretation of the Catholic faith in the sacramental presence of the living Lord in the community of the church and in the Eucharist. In this respect his views fit entirely within the boundaries of Old Catholic theology, which considers each local church community to be the body of Christ,⁵⁸ and which explicitly wants to build its ecclesiology on a soteriological-Trinitarian foundation.⁵⁹ In its refusal to make the belief in the real presence of the living Lord in

⁵⁸ Preamble, article 3.3, in: von Arx/Weyermann (eds), *Statut* (as note 49), 29.

⁵⁹ Article 3.4, in: *ibid.*, 30

the Eucharist (partly) dependent on a philosophical model of explanation,⁶⁰ Old Catholic theology will find Jenson's support. Even in respect to its critical dimensions, Jenson's theology can, in my view, contribute positively to Old Catholic thinking about the church and the Eucharist.

*Louis C. Runhaar (*1980 Delft NL), MA, serves as parish priest of the Old Catholic church of St. George in Amersfoort NL. From 1998 to 2008 he studied Reformed Theology at the Theological University (Broederweg faculty) of Kampen. From 2009 to 2013 he was employed for the Roman Catholic Broadcasting Company 'KRO' in Hilversum. From 2011 to 2014 he studied Old Catholic theology at the Old Catholic Seminary in Utrecht. From 2010 to 2017 Runhaar was editor and later editorial chairman of the Dutch church magazine 'De Oud-Katholiek'.*

*Address: 't Zand 15, NL-3811 GB Amersfoort, The Netherlands
E-Mail: lcrunhaar@hotmail.com*

Zusammenfassung

Wie könnte das theologische Denken Robert W. Jensions (1930–2017) über den Leib Christi zur altkatholischen theologischen Reflexion über Kirche und Eucharistie beitragen? Der Autor plädiert dafür, Jensions Theologie über die Gegenwart Christi als Versuch zu verstehen, westliche Theologie besser zum Ausdruck bringen zu lassen, wie der Leib Christi hier und jetzt in der Kirche und in der Eucharistie zur Verfügung steht. Obwohl eine Reihe Fragen im Hinblick auf Jensions Verständnis der konstitutiven Rolle historischer Narrative und auf seine Bewertung klassischer Metaphysik bleibt, könnten seine eschatologische Orientierung (v. a. im Rekurs auf die ungeteilte Kirche), seine Betonung der grundlegenden Bedeutung biblischer Erzählungen und sein Verständnis von Christi Gegenwart in der Gemeinschaft der Kirche ausgezeichnet zu altkatholischem Denken beitragen.

Keywords – Schlüsselwörter

Communio Ecclesiology – Sacramentology – Ecumenism – Narrative Theology – Old Catholic Theology

⁶⁰ Cf. Declaration of Utrecht (1889), article 6, in: von Arx/Weyermann (eds), *Statut* (as note 49), 57–59.