## Introduction

In an age of metaphysical exhaustion and ecological unraveling, the capacity to speak and to listen sacramentally, to engage the world through a liturgy of attention, has all but disappeared. Modernity has trained us to speak in the voice of mastery in analytic, utilitarian, and disenchanted tones. Yet within the Christian tradition, and across premodern metaphysical grammars, we find another mode of language in one that *participates* rather than *possesses*, one that listens before it speaks. This paper explores how Catherine Pickstock's doxological metaphysics of liturgical language and William Desmond's metaxological ontology of the "between" converge to recover a metaphysics of sacramental communion. That recovery, I argue, holds urgent implications for the ecological and theological crises of our time.

The paper proceeds from the conviction that metaphysical language, especially when shaped by sacramental and liturgical forms, is not an optional ornament to theology or ecology, but rather constitutive of how we experience and inhabit being. Both Pickstock and Desmond critique modernity's foreclosure of metaphysical astonishment. For Pickstock, this is achieved through the suppression of participatory, performative language (Pickstock 1998, 23–25). Likewise, for Desmond, it emerges from the modern obsession with univocal determinacy and dialectical closure, which empties being of its "intimate strangeness" (Desmond 1995, xiii; Desmond 2012, 10). In contrast to the modern reduction of truth to propositional correctness, both thinkers invite us to rediscover truth as an event of communion as a "conforming" between word and world, thought and thing, liturgist and God (Pickstock 2020, 13; Desmond 2005, 223).

This concern is hardly novel in a much larger context than modern theology or philosophy, or reductionist endeavors. It echoes ancient and medieval metaphysical traditions

that understood being itself as expressive, symbolic, and gifted. Plato's Symposium casts speech as a daimonic activity, mediating between the mortal and divine, pointing beyond itself in eros (Plato *Symp.* 202d–203a). Augustine's *De doctrina christiana* affirms that signs, particularly those found in Scripture and sacrament, point beyond themselves to the eternal Logos (Augustine 1995, 1.2.2–1.3.4). For Pseudo-Dionysius, all naming of God is liturgical: "hymning" the One through a cascading chain of analogical participation (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, *DN* 1.1). Aquinas likewise insists that sacraments effect what they signify, because their signs participate in divine causality (Aquinas *ST* III.60.1). These thinkers all preserve a logic of symbolic excess that resists reduction to epistemology or instrumentality. Language, for them, is always already metaphysical as an embodied act (later echoed in the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty) that mediates between what is and what is more than what is.

Pickstock's *After Writing* builds directly from this tradition, arguing that liturgical language "undoes the speaking subject," resituating speech within the communal, eucharistic, and eschatological event of doxology (Pickstock 1998, 177). The Eucharist, she insists, is not merely a sign or symbol but a metaphysical act, but a saying that *is* a being. The modern severance of language from ritual, and of signs from the realities they signify, constitutes for Pickstock a profound ontological failure: "In the denial of the sacred and of liturgy as a total act, philosophy came to rely on writing, and writing is always in some sense necrophilic" (Pickstock 1998, 154). Liturgy, by contrast, sustains a kind of "musical time" that does not resolve into presence but remains open to divine interruption and surplus (Pickstock 1998, 173–76).

Desmond complements this picture with a metaphysical framework capable of holding such liturgical relationality. His "metaxological" philosophy names the space between beings

and Being, between self and other, where astonishment, gratitude, and community are possible (Desmond 1995, 181–84). Unlike dialectic, which seeks synthesis, or univocity, which demands sameness, the metaxological honors difference without disconnection. It allows being to be excessive, porous, even idiotic. That is, irreducibly particular and gratuitous (Desmond 1995, 55–57). Liturgical language, on this account, does not reduce the world to system or the divine to concept. Instead, it dwells in the "between," performing a communion that is always also a kenotic descent and a hyperbolic ascent (Desmond 2012, 78–81).

Bringing Pickstock's doxological epistemology and Desmond's metaxological metaphysics into conversation in order to recover a sacramental vision of language that is both ancient and radically contemporary has fascinating implications and ripple effects. As a result, I consider how such a vision might illuminate the anthropological and ecological significance of premodern modes of communication, gesture, chant, oral tradition, ritual, as proto-liturgical practices. If, as both thinkers suggest, language is not exhausted by signification but participates in being's self-showing, then even the non-verbal rituals of prehistoric humanity may be seen as metaphysical in the deepest sense.

Ultimately, this paper proposes that metaphysical liturgical language, far from being the province of the cloistered or the nostalgic, is a *key* to constructing a viable ecological metaphysics. By returning to the sacramental logic of ancient and medieval thought and drawing on Pickstock's and Desmond's retrievals of these traditions, we can begin to reimagine language itself as a form of communion: not a tool for mastery but a site for participation. Such a reimagining opens the door to an ontology in which the human speaks not *over* the world, but *with* it in song, in silence, in the fragile liturgy of participatory attention.

## Modernity, Language, and the Crisis of Communion

The modern "post" metaphysical landscape is marked by a profound estrangement from communion, both in the liturgical and ecological sense of the term. Where premodern metaphysics had regarded language as a medium of participation in the divine order, modern thought has recast it as a tool of representation, control, or self-expression. This shift is not merely semantic, and it signals a reordering of being itself. Pickstock and Desmond, each in distinct idioms, identify this rupture as central to the metaphysical crisis of modernity. For both thinkers, the failure of modern language is not simply a communication breakdown, but rather a symptom of a deeper disorder: the loss of metaphysical astonishment and the symbolic imagination that once made sacramentality and truth coextensive.

Desmond articulates the stakes of this shift in his diagnosis of the "metaphysics of modernity," which he characterizes as the attempt to bring the indeterminate plenitude of being under complete conceptual control. "We look to overtake conceptually the original overdeterminacy," he writes, "and to that degree the project is also the overcoming of metaphysical astonishment" (Desmond 2013, 543). This drive toward absolute determinability leads not to mastery but to exhaustion and a voiding of being's strangeness, resulting in a collapse into nihilistic immanence. In Desmond's terms, the doing of metaphysics becomes its undoing (Desmond 2013, 543–45). His fourfold schema of metaphysical sensibility—univocal, equivocal, dialectical, and metaxological — charts how modernity tends to oscillate between reductive univocity and fragmentary equivocity, leaving little room for the mediating "between" that sustains wonder, prayer, or praise (Desmond 1995, 181–82).

Pickstock offers a parallel critique from the angle of language and liturgy. In *After Writing*, she contends that the abandonment of liturgical form and temporality has precipitated the collapse of language into death or what she provocatively calls the "*necrophilia*" of writing. Drawing on Derrida, she argues that writing, severed from ritual and the voice, becomes a fetish of presence, simulating permanence while concealing its own deferral and absence (Pickstock 1998, 163–65). Yet unlike Derrida, she does not stop at critique. Rather, she retrieves the medieval understanding of liturgy as a mode of language that resists closure and is open to divine interruption, temporally recursive, and communally embodied (Pickstock 1998, 176–78). In this doxological speech, the speaking subject is decentered, the community is constituted, and truth is performed.

This tension between the sacramental and the secularized word can be traced further back in the tradition. Augustine, in *De doctrina christiana*, laments the misuse of signs when they are detached from their proper end, which is charity and participation in the divine Word (Augustine 1995, 1.36.40). For him, all language is inherently referential. The telos of language is not merely signification but sanctification. Likewise, Pseudo-Dionysius insists that all naming of God is hymnological: "Theology is hierarchical, liturgical, symbolic. It does not seek to grasp God but to lift the soul by means of symbolic excess" (Pseudo-Dionysius 1987, *DN* 1.1). Such ancient and medieval insights reveal that language, when detached from its liturgical horizon, inevitably becomes hollow, capable of describing but not disclosing, of indexing but not participating.

Modern philosophy, by contrast, often begins not in astonishment but in suspicion. The Cartesian turn to the *cogito* and the Kantian restriction of knowledge to phenomena both

establish a horizon in which language is no longer a bridge to the real but a barrier. As Desmond notes, the "Copernican Revolution" in metaphysics establishes the self-legislating subject as the arbiter of truth, thereby breaking down the porosity between being and knowing (Desmond 2005, 225–26). This renders metaphysical claims suspect and makes liturgical or sacramental language seem either naïve or coercive. The late modern anxiety over metaphysical speech, its supposed violence, its nostalgia, and its theological overreach emerges from this dislocation.

Yet precisely here Desmond and Pickstock reassert the theological claim that language is not merely a human invention but a divine gift, and that its capacity to mean arises from its participation in the divine Logos. Desmond calls this the "idiocy of being," not in the pejorative sense, but in its root meaning of the *idios*, the irreducibly singular gift of what is (Desmond 1995, 55–57). Language, insofar as it reflects and responds to this gift, must itself be idiotic, not reducible to system, not subordinated to dialectic, but porous to the other and open to astonishment. Pickstock's Eucharistic poetics, where speech stammers, time folds, and voice yields to silence, likewise refuses the tyranny of clarity. Liturgical language, she insists, is not about mastering presence but about entering into it through a kenosis and praise (Pickstock 1998, 179).

Both thinkers thus suggest that communion, whether liturgical, interpersonal, or ecological, requires a different metaphysical grammar. It requires a recovery of what Plato called *anamnesis*, a remembering of our participation in a reality that exceeds us but invites our response (Plato, *Phaedrus* 249e-250d). It requires, as Aquinas knew, a metaphysics of analogy, where words do not grasp God but gesture toward God in love (Aquinas *ST* I.13.5). In their respective idioms, Pickstock and Desmond both seek to reintegrate language, being, and truth

within a sacramental horizon. The task before us is to carry this reintegration forward into anthropology, cosmology, and ultimately ecology.

If the modern loss of communion is marked most vividly by our ecological crisis (our inability to live within limits and seek market-based technocratic solutions, to speak with reverence, and to dwell liturgically), then recovering a sacramental metaphysics of language is not a matter of liturgical reform alone. It is a matter of ecological survival. What is at stake, as Desmond might put it, is nothing less than the capacity to say being, and to let being say us.

## Pickstock's Liturgical Metaphysics of Language

Catherine Pickstock's work, particularly in *After Writing* and *Aspects of Truth*, offers a bold metaphysical claim that language, when severed from liturgical practice, disintegrates. In contrast to postmodern suspicions that all language is haunted by absence and violence, Pickstock argues that the crisis of meaning stems not from the nature of language itself, but from its detachment from the liturgical and sacramental. The only stable form of language, she argues, is doxological, because it is the only form that is ultimately *true*. In this section, I examine Pickstock's metaphysics of liturgy, paying particular attention to her understanding of time, voice, non-identity, and the Eucharist as a performed ontology of communion.

At the center of Pickstock's claim is the assertion that liturgy is not merely expressive but *formative*, not a container for meaning but its condition. Drawing on the Neoplatonic and Thomist traditions, she proposes that "only in liturgical language do the elements of signification, event, and participation fully converge" (Pickstock 1998, 177). This convergence resists both the epistemological reduction of language to propositional content and the

phenomenological reduction to subjective experience. Instead, liturgical language, particularly in the Eucharistic tradition, enacts a participatory metaphysics in which speech mediates a real relation between creature, creation, and Creator.

This doxological relation is inherently non-identical and non-totalizing. It is characterized by "stammering," repetition, and musical time, all of which subvert the modern obsession with clarity and presence (Pickstock 1998, 178–80). In what she calls "musical time," liturgical language undoes the linearity of secular temporality, in which meaning is always deferred or possessed. Instead, repetition in the liturgy, such as the Gloria, Sanctus, and Amen, constitutes a spiraling return and a Eucharistic *anamnesis* that makes present what cannot be grasped. As she writes, "The order of the Mass does not move straightforwardly toward a conclusion. Instead, the ceremony is full of anticipations, recapitulations, interruptions and repetitions" (Pickstock 1998, 181). This spiraling temporality opens space for an encounter with the eternal in time, or what Christian tradition has recognized in the Eucharist as *kairos* breaking into *chronos*.

Crucially, this liturgical mode of time is also a mode of *voice*. Pickstock insists on the orality of liturgical speech, not as nostalgia for pre-literacy, but as a metaphysical act of vulnerability and openness. The voice, unlike writing, is always contextual, embodied, and responsive. "Voice cannot be removed from presence and gesture," she writes, it "forces language to remain bound to the particular and the temporal" (Pickstock 1998, 174). In contrast, writing presumes a disembodied mastery or what she names a "necrophilic" aspiration to pure presence and control. The modern privileging of writing, particularly in its philosophical forms, is symptomatic of a broader metaphysical disease and the tacit or explicit desire to eliminate the otherness of meaning, to fix the sign and stabilize the signified. However, in doing so, it loses

truth, which, for Pickstock, is not a static content but a divine gift encountered through ritual repetition.

The Eucharist stands as the paradigmatic counter to this metaphysical closure. Here, words do not point beyond the bread and wine; they *become* them. The consecration is not symbolic in the modern sense, but sacramental: the word enacts the real. “It is only in the liturgical Eucharistic moment,” Pickstock writes, “that the plenitude of signification and presence occurs” (Pickstock 1998, 192). This act is inherently communal, interruptive, and hyperbolic. The speaking subject is decentered; the priest does not invent meaning but participates in a tradition older and deeper than himself. Truth, in this moment, is neither correspondence nor coherence. Truth is *conformation* to Christ, performed through rite.

Pickstock's later work, in *Aspects of Truth,* develops these metaphysical commitments through a more explicit engagement with ontology. There, she articulates truth not as an epistemic relation between proposition and object, but as a metaphysical conformation between mind and being: “Truth is to be understood as a proportion, a fittingness between the knower and the known, which always exceeds both” (Pickstock 2020, 10). This excess is not a deficiency but a gift. Drawing on Augustine and Plato, she contends that the “symbolic gift” of the real cannot be mastered, only deciphered through prayer, poetry, and liturgy (Pickstock 2020, 12–14). Liturgy, then, becomes not just one mode of knowing among others, but the consummation of knowledge itself.

It is significant that for Pickstock, liturgical truth is *not* escapist. She resists the temptation, common in both analytic and continental thought as well as contemporary Western theologies of the 20$^{th}$ and 21$^{st}$ centuries, to treat metaphysics as either a rational system or a

poetic fiction. Instead, she recovers a high medieval and Neoplatonic vision in which metaphysics is *performed* through enacted praise. This performance is neither arbitrary nor aestheticist, but it is constrained by tradition, communal form, and the doxological orientation of the creature toward the Creator. In this sense, Pickstock's metaphysics aligns with Aquinas's conviction that truth is ultimately theological: "The measure of truth is God, and all created intellects participate in this measure imperfectly" (Aquinas, *ST* I.16.5).

Her claim, ultimately, is that liturgy is not ancillary to philosophy, but it is philosophy's end. Liturgy is the consummation of metaphysics in embodied, ecstatic communion. Without it, language collapses into abstraction or ideology. With it, language becomes Eucharistic as hyperbolic, transformative, and ultimately true. Such language does not merely describe the world, but it transfigures the speaker, and by extension, the world itself.

This view has immense implications for how we think about speech, ritual, and ecological embodiment. The liturgy teaches us that words are not tools, but gestures of offering. They are not technologies of distance and separation but modes of nearness. In the Eucharist, language breaks open, and in its breaking, it feeds. This is not merely a theological statement; it is a metaphysical one. And in a time of planetary crisis for the biosphere, such a metaphysics may be the only one capable of orienting us, as humans, towards a more meaningful existence.

## Desmond's Metaxological and Agapeic Ontology

Where Catherine Pickstock recovers the metaphysical fullness of language through liturgical performance, William Desmond offers a complementary metaphysical framework that honors

the relational space in which such performances occur. His metaxological philosophy, centered on the "between" (*metaxu*), articulates an ontology capacious enough to hold communion, difference, excess, and transcendence without collapsing into dialectical resolution or skeptical fragmentation. In Desmond's terms, the liturgical language that Pickstock retrieves performs a metaxological reality, and one in which being is always *between* self and other, presence and absence, immanence and transcendence. To speak truthfully, then, is to speak *from* the between, *within* the between, and *for* the between.

Desmond's core critique of modern metaphysics mirrors Pickstock's. Like her, he traces the modern crisis of meaning to the eclipse of metaphysical astonishment by systems of totalizing reason. "The original astonishment before the givenness of being," he writes, "has been traded for determinacy, systematization, and the will to mastery" (Desmond 1995, xiii). The modern privileging of univocity, the presumption that being and meaning can be made perfectly clear and determinate, ultimately leads to what he calls "the voiding of being" (Desmond 2013, 543). In this metaphysical economy, there is no room for mystery, silence, or liturgy, since the relational strangeness of being has been reduced to technical knowability.

Desmond's response is to retrieve a fourfold sensibility of being: the univocal (focused on sameness), the equivocal (focused on difference), the dialectical (focused on mediation), and the metaxological (focused on relational excess and openness) (Desmond 1995, 181–84). The modern landscape of thought, in his view, oscillates fruitlessly between the univocal and equivocal and between systems that collapse everything into sameness and postmodern refusals that disperse everything into isolated fragments. The dialectical (particularly in its Hegelian form) attempts to mediate these extremes through synthesis. But for Desmond, even dialectic

finally fails to do justice to what he calls "the overdetermined excess of being" (Desmond 1995, 183). Only the metaxological thinking from the "between" can sustain the ambiguity, otherness, and gratuity at the heart of reality.

This between is not merely spatial or conceptual. It is a metaphysical condition of participation. In *Being and the Between*, Desmond describes it as "the preobjective communion of mindfulness and being" (Desmond 1995, 182). We do not stand outside being, as modern epistemology imagines, nor are we dissolved into being, as some postmodern mysticisms suggest. Rather, we are always already *in relation*: with the world, with others, with the divine. This in-betweenness is not a limitation but a gift. It is the space where liturgy becomes possible, where voice emerges, where communion is enacted.

Integral to this vision is Desmond's concept of the "agapeic origin" of being. In contrast to ontologies founded on necessity or will, Desmond posits that being itself is gift: given in love, irreducible to calculation or cause (Desmond 1995, 229–30). He calls this the "idiocy of being" not in the pejorative sense, but from the Greek *idios*, meaning singular or one's own. Each being bears a kind of gratuitous singularity, a non-repeatable particularity that resists absorption into a system (or field if speaking from a physis lens). This idiocy is not unintelligible, but rather superabundantly intelligible. It exceeds comprehension in a way that evokes awe, rather than analysis.

Speech, in this frame, is not primarily representational but *response*. To speak, to truly speak, is to respond to the agapeic gift of being. "We speak because being has first spoken us," Desmond suggests (Desmond 2012, 45). This reverses the modern privileging of human agency in language. It also aligns closely with Pickstock's insistence that liturgical language is always a

secondary speech: a repetition of a Word already spoken, a participation in an excess that precedes us. For both thinkers, true speech is not self-expressive but doxological. It praises what it cannot master, it names without containing, it opens rather than encloses.

Desmond's emphasis on porosity between beings, between thought and being, between God and creation, grounds a metaphysical openness essential to any theology of communion. In his later work, he develops this into a post-critical metaphysics of gratitude, arguing that to think rightly is to think with thanks (Desmond 2005, 228–29). This posture of gratitude resists both the pride of autonomous reason and the despair of deconstructive suspicion. It acknowledges that being is not ours to command, but ours to receive.

Here, Desmond's metaphysics becomes explicitly Eucharistic. Although he rarely uses the term "liturgy" in the referenced works, his metaphysical language evokes the structure of the Eucharist: a gift received in humility, offered in return, and shared in community. To live in the between is to live liturgically, and therefore, to move through the world not as a conqueror or consumer but as a celebrant, one who receives and gives back. As he writes in *Ethics and the Between*, "There is an original giving of being that calls for an ethical and aesthetic response, a saying of yes to the being of the other" (Desmond 2001, 17).

This "yes" is not merely intellectual, but it is bodily, affective, and communal. It is, in a word, *liturgical*. Desmond's ontology thus provides the metaphysical scaffolding for Pickstock's doxological language. Where she shows how liturgical speech enacts truth, he shows why such speech is metaphysically necessary. Both reject modernity's severance of language from being and being from love. Both propose, instead, a sacramental realism that is an account of the world in which words have weight, bodies have meaning, and beings have worth beyond utility.

In theological terms, Desmond's metaxological vision can be read as a kind of re-enchanted Thomism, one that retains Aquinas's analogical metaphysics while expanding its phenomenological and ethical resonance. Like Aquinas, Desmond affirms that all beings participate analogically in God. But unlike Aquinas, he does not begin with essence or cause, but with gift. This shift moves us from a scholastic metaphysics of hierarchy to an existential metaphysics of communion, and a shift that is increasingly necessary in an age where ontological flattening and ecological fragmentation are twin symptoms of metaphysical failure and modern psychological (and theological) fracturing.

To speak in the between, then, is not merely to affirm difference or ambiguity. It is to stand at the altar of being and offer thanks. It is to recognize the other not as object or obstacle, but as a fellow participant in the liturgy of the real. It is to say, with Pickstock and Desmond alike, that metaphysics must end in praise. or else it ends in nothing.

## Ancient Language as Liturgy

If, as Catherine Pickstock insists, liturgical language is the only form of speech that fully participates in truth (Pickstock 1998, 177), and if, as William Desmond contends, all speaking emerges from a prior astonishment before the gift of being (Desmond 1995, xiii), then the roots of such language must reach deeper than formal religion or philosophical reflection. They must stretch back to the earliest symbolic acts of humanity, from a guttural utterance, the ritual gesture, the burial of the dead, to the rhythmic dance around a fire. This section examines the hypothesis that prehistoric and ancient language practices, particularly in their oral, embodied, and symbolic forms, anticipated what we now refer to as liturgy. More than tools for information

transfer, these primal acts of communication were metaphysical responses to the world, a kind of proto-sacramental participation in the rhythm of being.

Modern theories of language often begin with abstraction, viewing language as a code, a system, or a convention. But from a theological and metaphysical perspective, language originates not in utility but in wonder. The earliest symbolic gestures, as seen in cave paintings, funerary rites, and incantations, reveal that early humans sought not merely to survive but to relate to their world meaningfully. As Jean-Louis Chrétien observes, "The first speech is always a response. We are never the origin of language, but those summoned to it" (Chrétien 2004, 19). The earliest speech, then, may well have been prayer.

In this light, we might understand prehistoric communication as inherently *liturgical*. Consider the burial sites at Shanidar or Sungir, where Neanderthals and early Homo sapiens interred their dead with red ochre, flowers, and tools, indicating a sense of the sacred, of something more than mere utility (Watkins 2015, 48–52). These are not acts of survival. They are proto-eucharistic (or more simply eucharistic) responses to the givenness and strangeness of life and death. They perform Desmond's "agapeic astonishment" before the idiocy of being with the irreducible singularity of the other whose being has now slipped away (Desmond 1995, 55–57).

Moreover, these early rituals likely involved sound, including intonation, chant, and repetition. Before language (as we know and understand it) was written, it was chanted; before it was propositional, it was embodied. This orality supports Pickstock's claim that voice, not writing, is the originary mode of truth. Voice binds speaker and hearer in a shared moment of presence; it requires proximity, breath, and vulnerability. "Unlike writing," Pickstock notes,

"voice cannot forget time or space—it is always already with and for another" (Pickstock 1998, 174). In this way, the oral rituals of early humans were not simply expressions of communal sentiment, they were metaphysical acts of presence and participation.

Plato, too, hints at this deeper connection between language, memory, and liturgy much later in the human story. In the *Phaedrus*, he distinguishes true recollection (*anamnesis*) from the mere recording of facts. Writing, he argues, is a forgetful imitation of wisdom, whereas dialectic and ritualized speech draw the soul upward through memory of the divine (Plato, *Phaedrus* 275a–277a). In his later dialogues, Plato suggests that the best philosophical speech is akin to hymn: not an analysis but a *sung response* to truth (Plato, *Laws* 700d). Pickstock develops this point explicitly, arguing that liturgy undermines the subject's control of language, returning the speaker to a condition of participatory reception —a movement akin to Plato's erotic ascent through the *metaxu* of beauty (Pickstock 1998, 176–78).

Desmond's metaxological account further deepens this point by showing how such early human expressions dwell in the "between." Their speech and gesture are not fully determinate, nor fully equivocal. They do not seek clarity or closure, but presence. They mediate between the ineffable and the expressible, between silence and song. "There is an original porosity to being," Desmond writes, "a between that allows us to be moved, to be wounded, to be called forth into communion" (Desmond 2005, 226). Prehistoric ritual, in this view, is already metaphysics—not in the scholastic sense of causa prima, but in the existential sense of a grateful "yes" to being.

This reading is reinforced by Desmond's notion of the *idiotic origin* of being: the gratuitous and unaccountable particularity of the world. The first symbolic marks on cave walls, the first sacred groves, the first rhythms of drum and voice, may be understood as early

responses to that idiocy. They do not seek explanation, but evocation. They do not claim presence, but consent to it. In this way, they resemble the Eucharistic liturgy itself, which is both a saying and a waiting, a naming and a surrender, a gesture and a reception.

It is no accident that the word *liturgy* (*λειτουργία*) originally meant “the work of the people.” In its ancient Greek usage, it referred to public, often sacred, performances that enacted the communal good. While the Christian Eucharist radicalizes this meaning, uniting the cosmos with Christ’s body, the fundamental insight remains that language is not merely personal or propositional, but performative, public, and metaphysical. To speak is to enact a vision of the world. The earliest speakers were, therefore, not just survivalists, proto-scientists, or journalists. They were celebrants.

> "This food is called among us Eucharist, of which no one is allowed to partake except one who believes that things which we teach are true... For we do not receive these things as common bread nor common drink; but in like manner as Jesus Christ our Savior having been incarnate by God's logos took both flesh and blood for our salvation, so also we have been taught that the food eucharistized through the word of prayer that is from Him, from which our flesh and blood are nourished by transformation, is the flesh and blood of that Jesus who became incarnate" (Justin Martyr First Apology 66; Holmes 2007, 247).

Recognizing this liturgical dimension in ancient and prehistoric language allows us to reframe the question of truth. If truth is, as Pickstock claims, the fittingness between the knower and the known (Pickstock 2020, 10), and if, as Desmond suggests, being itself is gift (Desmond 2012, 74), then early human speech is not primitive and it is prophetic. It anticipates the

Eucharist not in concept, but in structure, as a repeated, communal, embodied response to the mystery of being and what lies beneath truth in the cosmos. Such speech is not surpassed by modern clarity; it is *fulfilled* in sacramental liturgy.

This insight bears weight for ecological theology. Modern humanity often regards the non-human world as mute, as raw material to be mastered or measured. However, the ritual practices of earlier humanity suggest another relationship, one of reverence, response, and shared participation. If language begins in liturgy, and liturgy begins in astonishment, then speaking truly requires not command but communion. And in an era of ecological collapse, this older, deeper mode of speech may be precisely what we need to recover ourselves and our meta and physical role on our planet.

## Toward an Ecological Metaphysics of Communion

The sacramental and metaxological visions developed by Pickstock and Desmond open a path not only for renewing metaphysics but for reimagining ecology as a form of communion. In an era of planetary disintegration, characterized by deforestation, extinction, and climate destabilization, ecological theology must be more than a moral appeal or a scientific supplement. It *must* be metaphysical. That is, it must address the deeper questions of what it means to be, to speak, and to dwell among others, human and more-than-human, in a world given, not owned. In this section, I propose that the metaphysical recovery of liturgical language leads to an ecological ontology: one in which beings are not isolated entities, but participants in a shared liturgy of presence and praise.

> "As this broken bread scattered on the mountains was gathered and became one, so too, may your Church be gathered together from the ends of the earth into your kingdom" (Didache 9.4; Holmes 2007, 355).

Desmond's concept of the *agapeic origin* is crucial in this context. In contrast to the modern tendency to view nature as a separate brute fact or neutral resource available for market-driven extraction or exploitation, Desmond insists that being is first and always a gift. "Being gives us to be," he writes, "before we think about the meaning of what it is to be" (Desmond 1995, 55). This priority of givenness undermines any metaphysical claim to possession. We do not own the world; we inhabit it liturgically. The same is true of our fellow creatures. Trees, rivers, and animals all share in the idiocy of being, bearing their own singular, irreducible worth. This is not romanticism or quietism. It is metaphysical realism, rooted in a participatory ontology that finds echoes in the works of Augustine, Aquinas, and Dionysius the Areopagite.

Additionally, Tertullian's complex understanding of the relationship between *corpus*, *caro*, *spiritus*, and *anima* demonstrates an early Christian grappling with the "between" of materiality and spirituality. As Sarah Morgan Epplin's research shows, Tertullian believed the eucharistic bread and wine were "imbued with Christ's presence," a presence he conceived as "purely spiritual in nature during his early career but which became increasingly physical in his later texts" (Epplin 2020, 82–83). This evolution in Tertullian's thought mirrors the movement from metaphysical abstraction to embodied communion.

Pickstock's liturgical metaphysics supports this reorientation. Her insistence that true language is doxological implies that the world itself is structured to receive, and return, praise. The Eucharist, in her reading, is not an interruption of nature but its fulfillment: "The liturgy

enacts a language which renders both the sign and the thing more real, because it points beyond itself" (Pickstock 1998, 179). This pointing beyond or toward is not a denial of materiality, but its elevation into communion. The Eucharist is not *against* nature. Rather, it is the telos of nature, where matter becomes the medium of grace.

This vision has profound ecological implications. In the Eucharist, bread and wine, products of Earth, more-than-human and human labor, become sacrament. This transformation reveals that the material world is not inert but porous to divinity. It is, as Aquinas insists, *capax Dei*: capable of bearing God (Aquinas, *ST* III.60.1). When we participate in this liturgy, we are not escaping creation, but we are entering into its deepest rhythms. In this way, the Eucharist reveals the world as sacramental not by exception but by vocation.

Desmond's metaxological ontology further clarifies how this vocation is lived. He describes the "between" not as a space of compromise, but as the ground of relational flourishing. "The metaxological," he writes, "preserves the open porosity of being—its capacity to relate, to give, to exceed" (Desmond 1995, 182). This means that ecological relationships between species, systems, and lifeways are not merely biological, economic, or market-driven transactional instances. They are metaphysical. They take place within the "between" that Desmond describes: a space charged with mystery, vulnerability, and gift. To damage that space through extraction or domination is not merely to break a contract. It is to violate a communion.

In this light, ecological violence becomes a kind of liturgical heresy. It enacts a false sacrament, and one in which consumption replaces communion, and domination substitutes for praise. The industrial imagination treats the world as *hostia* to be devoured, rather than *eucharistia* to be shared. It forgets what the ancient liturgies remember: that all things come from

God, and to God all things return. Desmond names this forgetfulness a form of metaphysical pride and the refusal of gratitude, characterized by the presumption of mastery (Desmond 2005, 228). Pickstock names it necrophilia, or the desire for language and thus the world to be dead, static, and controllable (Pickstock 1998, 165).

Recovering an ecological metaphysics, then, requires recovering the grammar of gratitude. To speak of a tree, a river, a reef, is to name not a resource but a mystery. Their being is not for us, yet they are with us. Desmond's insistence on the "idiocy" of every being, that each is given in its own way, for its own sake, rebukes any utilitarian calculus and reduction. It calls instead for reverence, attention, and praise. This metaphysical attitude is, fundamentally, liturgical in nature.

Such a liturgical ecology reframes the role of the human. We are not gods, nor parasites, nor even stewards in the managerial sense. We are celebrants, beings called to name, to bless, to protect. Our unique capacity for speech, rightly understood, is not a mark of superiority but of responsibility. We are those who can say the world back to itself in thanksgiving. We are those who can join the speech of wind, wolf, and waterfall in a shared doxology. As Psalm 148 reminds us, it is not only humans who praise: "Praise the Lord from the earth, you sea monsters and all deeps... fruit trees and all cedars... creeping things and flying birds!" (Ps. 148:7–10, NRSV). All creation is a choir.

Pickstock's metaphysics of language underscores this insight. Liturgy, she insists, is the "consummation of philosophy" and the point at which thought and being are reconciled through praise (Pickstock 1998, 192). When this liturgy includes bread and wine, it also includes wheat and vine, sun and soil. The ecological is not adjunct to the liturgical. It is its condition.

Desmond's "thankful thinking" makes this theological claim metaphysically rigorous. He reminds us that astonishment is not a prelude to analysis but a posture of right relation. To dwell in the world is to dwell in wonder. And to dwell liturgically is to let that wonder shape our economy, our speech, our ethics. It is, finally, to become capable of communion, not only with God and neighbor, but with every being that sings the glory of its Maker.

In the Anthropocene, where human action reshapes the planet at every level, this metaphysical reframing is not optional. It is essential. Without it, ecological efforts will remain reactive and fragmented. With it, they can become eucharistic: ordered not by scarcity but by gift, not by mastery but by celebration. In this vision, theology and ecology no longer stand apart. They become one liturgy, unfolding in time, echoing the voice of creation, and gathering all things into the praise of the One who gave them to be.

## Conclusion: Liturgical Speech for a Liturgical Cosmos

This paper has traced a path from the brokenness of modern language to the possibility of an ecological metaphysics grounded in sacramental communion. Along the way, we have seen how Catherine Pickstock's retrieval of liturgical language as the consummation of philosophy opens up a new (and ancient) understanding of truth, not as a static proposition, but as an embodied, Eucharistic performance of participation in divine reality. William Desmond's metaxological ontology, with its emphasis on astonishment, gratuity, and the porous "between," gives metaphysical depth to this vision. For both thinkers, language, when rightly understood, is never about control. It is about *communion*.

By engaging the prehistoric and ancient roots of human speech and ritual, we saw that liturgical language is not a late ecclesial development but the flowering of a symbolic mode of being already nascent in our earliest forms of gesture, chant, and burial. These embodied, communal expressions were not tools for survival but responses to the mystery of being. They anticipate what Pickstock and Desmond help us to recover: that to speak is to pray, to name is to praise, and to be is to be in relation.

We then turned toward the ecological implications of this metaphysical vision. The Eucharist, at the heart of Pickstock's project, reveals a cosmos not of ownership but of offering in a creation that becomes most itself when it is gathered, given, and shared. Desmond's idiotic and agapeic metaphysics expand this insight into a theology of the earth, where every creature, every being, is a gift before it is a resource, a mystery before it is a utility. The human vocation, in this light, is not dominion in the extractive sense but *celebration* in the liturgical sense.

This sacramental orientation toward the world is not escapist or sentimental. It demands attention, restraint, and reverence. It invites the revival and recovery of premodern practices, including seasonal rhythms, local knowledge, ritual humility, and communal belonging. It could inform liturgical theology, ecological ethics, education, land stewardship, and interspecies theology. It requires not only speaking differently, but listening differently to the Earth, to our ancestors, and to the silence in which the Word was spoken before all worlds.

In short, a liturgical ecological metaphysics asks us to become disciples of astonishment again. It asks us to recover a grammar that can name the world as gift without grasping it, and to speak in ways that let being truthfully, gratefully, and eucharistically. In a world fraying under

the weight of disconnection, this return to communion is not a retreat. It is a revolution of attention.

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