

## A Seat at the Table: Aquinas, Calvin, and UDL for Eucharistic Participation

### I. Introduction: Lex credendi, Lex Orandi, and Lex Vivendi

My daughter Junia<sup>1</sup> communicates best through her AAC (Augmented Assistive Communication) device. She non-verbally reaches out her hand in love and patience. She leads caregivers to the things she wants. One Sunday, she took her hand and put it in mine. To my surprise, she led me to the altar. This essay is a story about my discovery of faith found in the heart of an autistic child. She changed the way I understood the Christian tradition, Eucharistic theology, and the Body of Christ.

Her journey to the altar mirrored my own. I was surprised by what I found there—a God who loves my daughter, just as she was created to be. As I followed her lead, I was also being led to rediscover the theological and historical barriers that have excluded people like her. I heard her non-verbal expression of faith, a faith that historically would not have been recognized. At the Reformation and Enlightenment, participation in the Eucharist became increasingly tied to rational understanding.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, these theological and legal shifts prioritized cognitive ability over faith, establishing barriers that kept out God's people.

This essay reimagines the Eucharist as a place of belonging for all of Christ's body. To accomplish this, I integrate three *leges* (laws) by which this ancient rite stands: *lex orandi* (prayer and rite), *lex credendi* (theology), and *lex vivendi* (lived practice). *Lex orandi* brings doctrine to life in prayer and worship. Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is an inclusive

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<sup>1</sup> I have changed my daughter's name for privacy.

<sup>2</sup> For a comprehensive historical review of the development of exclusion from the Eucharist, see C. F. Goodey, "Exclusion from the Eucharist: The Re-shaping of Idiocy in the Seventeenth-Century Church," in *Intellectual Disability: A Conceptual History, 1200-1900*, ed. Patrick McDonagh, C. F. Goodey, and Tim Stainton (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2018), 53–74.

educational framework developed by scholars at Harvard's Center for Applied Special Technology (CAST). This framework seeks classroom participation, regardless of ability. Through the UDL principles of engagement, representation, and action and expression, I demonstrate how theological frameworks create avenues for belonging: cultivating spiritual desire, honoring diverse modes of communication, and celebrating embodied responses to God's grace.

*Lex credendi* roots the Church's faith and practice in historical and theological doctrine. To lay this foundation, I engage the sacramental theologies of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. Aquinas' theology affirms that grace and spiritual desire, rather than intellectual capacity, enables participation in the Eucharist. Calvin, with his theology of divine accommodation shows how a God made flesh made Himself available for us in the Eucharist. Together, their insights challenge exclusionary practices and offer a framework for Eucharistic belonging for the entire communion of saints.

Finally, *lex vivendi* transforms doctrine and worship into lived practice. Theological insights (*lex credendi*) and UDL principles (*lex orandi*) find embodiment in Eucharistic participation. Through a case study, I illustrate how my autistic daughter embodies this doctrine and worship. Using UDL-informed tools such as AAC, choice boards, and visual aids, she expresses spiritual desire and affirms her baptismal belonging. This lived reality challenges the Church to reimagine the Eucharistic rite in a way that honors the dignity of all in Christ's Kingdom.

Disability theologian Sarah Jean Barton observes, "Despite theological commitments embodied in signage and website headings that declare 'all are welcome here!' or 'come as you

are, no exceptions,’ many ecclesial practices remain abstracted from these theological commitments to Christian hospitality.” May we be a Church that truly understands Junia’s beautiful faith. By embracing the Church’s three *leges*—faith, worship, and lived practice—we can restore the Eucharistic Table as a place of belonging for all baptized believers. This is a Table that listens, learns, and welcomes without exception.

## **II. Lex orandi: UDL Principles of Engagement, Representation, and Action and Expression**

Lex orandi, lex credendi and lex vivendi interact like the sides of a triangle. When one is over or under emphasized, the triangle collapses.<sup>3</sup> As Barton notes above, many churches profess inclusion while their practices remain inaccessible. Liturgical theologian Maxwell Johnson writes, “When communities and individuals do not verify or authenticate their worship and beliefs in ethical lives consistent with that worship and belief, it is easy to conclude that something must be wrong with either the *lex orandi* or the *lex credendi*.<sup>4</sup> Our worship should not only be beautiful and compelling<sup>5</sup>—but accessible to all God’s people. Worship (*lex orandi*) that fails to communicate the core of our Christian belief (*lex credendi*) ultimately fails to enliven the Church to establish Christ’s Kingdom in the world (*lex vivendi*). Barring access to the Eucharistic Table to God’s people who have intellectual disabilities prevents the Church from accomplishing its mission to the world. Thus, how we might make the Eucharist accessible to all God’s people is vital to balancing all sides of the triangle by strengthening our worship, *lex orandi*.

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<sup>3</sup> Donna R. Hawk-Reinhard and Daniel J. Handschy, “Liturgical Revision, Past and Future” in *Eucharist Shaped Church, Eucharist-shaped Church: Prayer, Theology, Mission*, ed. Daniel J. Handschy, Donna R. Hawk-Reinhard, and Marshall E. Crossnoe (New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022), 301-302.

<sup>4</sup> Maxwell Johnson, Praying and Believing in Early Christianity: The Interplay between Christian Worship and Doctrine, 126–127.

<sup>5</sup> Donna R. Hawk-Reinhard and Daniel J. Handschy, *A Eucharist Shaped Church*, 301.

First, UDL's engagement principle seeks to motivate, support, and inspire learners. To encourage learners, UDL welcomes their interests and identities. This guideline "optimizes choice and autonomy"<sup>6</sup> by nurturing "joy and play."<sup>7</sup> Learning itself becomes the reward by supporting learners as they grow "to sustain effort and persistence."<sup>8</sup> By cultivating joy and curiosity, learners persist longer, engage deeper, and develop a passion for learning. As learners ignite a love for education, UDL "clearly articulates goals and purposes of goals"<sup>9</sup> to be "authentic and meaningful to learners themselves."<sup>10</sup> As we clarify these goals, community and belonging<sup>11</sup> provide a context. Lastly, UDL inspires students by designing options for "emotional capacity and executive function."<sup>12</sup> UDL creates a supportive environment that meets emotional needs by promoting self-awareness, empathy, and resilience.<sup>13</sup> By welcoming interests and passions, setting meaningful goals, and creating supportive emotional environments, the principle of engagement draws learners into a world of curiosity and discovery.

My daughter can often be described as being enraptured in the beauty of the world that she has created for herself. It is the nature of her diagnosis, autism. This term is from a reflective Greek pronoun, *αὐτός*, *autos*--and literally translates "self-ism." Yet the nature of the Eucharist draws believers into the new world of the Kingdom of God, inviting them "to touch other worlds"<sup>14</sup> as Orthodox liturgical theologian Alexander Schmemmen suggests. In a similar way, UDL opens a space where all individuals, regardless of their abilities, can enter that transformed

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<sup>6</sup>CAST, UDL Guidelines Version 3.0, (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 11, accessed September 20, 2024, <https://udlguidelines.cast.org>.

<sup>7</sup>CAST, "Consideration 7.3: Nurture Joy and Play," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 12.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup>CAST, "Goal: Learner Agency that is Purposeful and Reflective, Resourceful and Authentic, Strategic and Action-Directed," 6.

<sup>12</sup> CAST, "Guideline 9: Design Options for Emotional Capacity," 15.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Schmemann, *Eucharist: Sacrament of Kingdom*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 46.

reality. Just as the Eucharist transcends earthly boundaries, UDL transcends educational barriers, so that we can create a liturgy that invites everyone into the fullness of God's Kingdom.

The second UDL principle of representation supports varied options for perception and clarifies language and symbols to build knowledge.<sup>15</sup> This principle presents information in various ways: touch, sound, and sight. This allows learners to "customize the way information is presented."<sup>16</sup> It teaches that there is no "correct" way to communicate. By presenting communication as neutral, UDL honors all voices, like that of Junia, to speak in their preferred way. This principle "creates space for multiple ways of knowing."<sup>17</sup> It values knowledge beyond facts, like experience and stories.

As UDL presents information in various ways, the Eucharist presents the love and knowledge of God through the senses. Liturgical theologian Romano Guardini writes, "Liturgy speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures; it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life. Such is the wonderful fact which the liturgy demonstrates: it unites act and reality in a supernatural childhood before God."<sup>18</sup> For Junia, this experience is not just intellectual, but sensory—through the sights, sounds, and rhythms of the liturgy. The principle of representation in UDL transcends linguistic barriers and allows God's people to enter into God's presence through the full sensory tapestry of the Eucharistic rite. Sight, sound, and movement become the language of divine encounter.

Lastly, action and expression reiterate core themes in UDL by encouraging authentic interaction through multiple means of expression. Action and expression emphasize

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<sup>15</sup>CAST, "Guideline 1: Design Options for Perception," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 17.

<sup>16</sup> CAST, "Consideration 1.1: Support opportunities to customize the display of information," 18.

<sup>17</sup> CAST, "Guideline 3: Design options for building knowledge," 21.

<sup>18</sup> Romano Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic, and the Spirit of the Liturgy* (New York: 1950), 180-18

"communication through various media."<sup>19</sup> This supports "building fluency by setting goals and anticipating challenges."<sup>20</sup> Action and expression honor how learners occupy and move in space by "physically embodying learning (singing, walking, standing up)."<sup>21</sup> It encourages creative listening to voices like Junia's by optimizing access to assistive technologies like AAC and Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS). Action and expression reiterate the importance of using multiple media tools for "construction, composition, and creativity."<sup>22</sup> This guideline gives learners ample room and time to explore tools and use them in the way that best suits their individual needs. It "emphasizes 'process over product' and formative assessment."<sup>23</sup> This creativity empowers learners to set goals, plan for challenges, and monitor their progress.

The Eucharist empowers believers for the Christian life—to set goals, plan for challenges, and monitor our progress. It is through this Eucharistic liturgy we are formed to be people of praise. Alexander Schmemann argues that humanity, while called, "homo sapien"—properly we should be called, "homo adorans."<sup>24</sup> This praise, this Eucharist, is our end and fulfillment. The end of all of humanity's hunger finds itself in praise and thanksgiving of our Creator—εὐχαριστία. Because of her disability, my daughter's needs are complex. But as a human being, *homo adorans*, her needs are quite simple. Faith required for this Eucharistic meal does not come at the end of careful intellectual deliberation. It comes out of a life and community in praise and adoration of this witness. And so, we come together as one Body to praise and rejoice that we have been invited to God's Table.

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<sup>19</sup> CAST, "Consideration 5.1: Use multiple media for communication", 26.

<sup>20</sup> CAST, "Consideration 5.3: Build fluencies with graduated support for practice and performance," 27.

<sup>21</sup> CAST, "Vary and honor the methods for response, navigation, and movement," 25.

<sup>22</sup> CAST, "Consideration 5.2: Use multiple tools for construction, composition, and creativity," 26.

<sup>23</sup> CAST, "Consideration 5.3: Build fluencies with graduated support for practice and performance," 27.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy*, (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1998), 15.

The UDL principles work together to ensure meaningful and effective participation in education for all learners. Engagement uses joy and delight to motivate learners by drawing them into a world of discovery. Representation uses various formats to honor and clarify all communication. Encouraging learners through engagement and listening, the principle of action and expression fosters a creative environment for demonstrating their knowledge.

Through engagement in the Eucharist draws worshippers as Schmemann writes, “to touch other worlds”<sup>25</sup>-- the joy and mystery of Christ’s body and blood. The liturgy represents this mystery with light, color, touch and sound, to encounter Christ’s presence in the Eucharist. Through our actions and expression—active participation in the Eucharist, we are shaped into a people of praise, drawn into a life of thanksgiving and communion with God.

### **III. Theological Foundations and Sacramental Participation**

Our exploration of how UDL principles intersect with the Eucharist cannot stand in isolation. Lex orandi, our worship, must be grounded in lex credendi to root our doctrine in history and to firmly establish the theological subject of our worship. In the following section, we will examine two often contrasting yet complementary figures in the development of Anglican doctrine: Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin. A nuanced examination of both theologians reveals a theological base for Eucharistic belonging for all God's people. Careful theological and historical examination helps us “clarify what we intend to say and how we hope to form the body of our belief through our corporate prayer.”<sup>26</sup> The tension between Aquinas’ theological system and Calvin’s pastoral insight, though often oppositional, is both essential and complementary to Anglican theology. Aquinas’ emphasis on the transformative power of grace in the Eucharist provides a foundation for understanding the sacrament as an

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<sup>25</sup> Alexander Schmemann, *Eucharist: Sacrament of Kingdom*, 46.

<sup>26</sup>Daniel J. Handschy, *A Eucharist Shaped Church*, 10.

invitation to all, regardless of intellectual capacity. Conversely, Calvin's theology of accommodation, with its focus on making the Eucharist accessible to the entire body of Christ, brings a pastoral lens that emphasizes belonging in practice. This tension deepens our understanding of how the Eucharist can be accessible to all of God's people.

### **A. Thomas Aquinas on Intellectual Disability and the Eucharist:**

Thomas Aquinas, a towering theological figure of the 13th century, offers a highly developed yet surprisingly inclusive perspective on the sacrament of the Eucharist. First, we will explore "what" a sacrament is for Aquinas. We will explore the sacraments' efficacy and causality and how they push against Western Christianity's 21st-century notions of what happens at the Table. Secondly, we will explore "who" the sacrament is for and who may receive the sacraments, particularly those whom Aquinas writes "lack reason" (*amentia*). Lastly, we explore the "how" and apply UDL principles to Aquinas' thought to see how we might, as Barton suggests, practice what we preach in the hospitality of the Eucharist. Understanding what the sacrament is, who it is for, and how we apply it will give us deeper theological insight into how we might invite all of God's people to His Table.

#### **1. The Sacrament Defined by Aquinas: Principal and Instrumental Causes:**

First, let us set the Table with Aquinas. Sacraments are ordinary elements, like bread and wine, through which God gives grace to humanity. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas distinguishes between principal causes and instrumental causes to clarify the nature of the sacraments. God is the prime actor, or principal cause, in these sacraments. The Eucharist—the bread and wine—serves as an instrumental cause of grace, similar to how a sculptor uses marble

to create a masterpiece.<sup>27</sup> Aquinas concludes, “The instrumental cause works not by the power of its form, but only by the motion whereby it is moved by the principal agent: so that the effect is not likened to the instrument but to the principal agent.”<sup>28</sup> God thus uses the sacraments to dispense grace to humanity. God acts as the principal cause upon ordinary elements as instruments for His purpose.<sup>29</sup> Sacraments are not a reward for our faith. Our intellectual understanding does not bring about grace. We are but recipients, instruments to God's power shown through the sacraments.

## **2. The Sacrament is for all God's people, including *amens*:**

God sets His table as the principal cause, using the sacrament as the instrumental cause to dispense grace. For whom is the Table set? Humanity is the recipient of grace in the sacraments. Aquinas understands humanity as rational animals; thus, it follows that reason is necessary to receive the Eucharist. But what about Aquinas' term, *amens*, or those who lack reason? Should they be allowed to receive the Eucharist? Aquinas poses these questions in Part III, Question 80, Article 9 of the *Summa Theologica*. First, by clarifying Aquinas's understanding of *amentia*, we can consider *amens* inclusion in the Eucharist. Then, we will connect Aquinas to current

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<sup>27</sup> Marilyn McCord Adams explains: “Aristotle identifies the sculptor as a *per se* cause of the sculpture because the substance subject is denominated “sculptor” from sculpting power and the power to produce sculptures is what sculpting power essentially is.” (Marilyn McCord Adams, *Some Later Medieval Theories of the Eucharist: Thomas Aquinas, Gilles of Rome, Duns Scotus, and William Ockham* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 58.)

<sup>28</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *The Summa Theologiæ*, Third Part, Question 62, Second and Revised Edition (1920; online edition, translated by Fathers of the English Dominican Province; copyright © 2017 by Kevin Knight), “The Sacraments' Principal Effect, Which Is Grace.”

<sup>29</sup> Aquinas: “We must therefore say otherwise, that an efficient cause is twofold, principal and instrumental. The principal cause works by the power of its form, to which form the effect is likened; just as fire by its own heat makes something hot. In this way none but God can cause grace: since grace is nothing else than a participated likeness of the Divine Nature.” (Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 62, a. 1.) A more extensive discussion, not distinctively relevant here for Aquinas on the sacraments, is how Christ's passion is the instrumental cause, as the sacraments, “flow from the side of Christ.” (Kilmartin, 258). For further discussion, see Edward J. Kilmartin, S.J., *The Eucharist in the West: History and Theology*, ed. Robert Daley (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2004), 254-58.

concerns about intellectual disability to discuss using UDL principles to open His Table to all His people.

Aquinas' 13th-century use of *amentia* is difficult to translate to 21st-century psychological terms. In the term *amentia*, Aquinas seems to describe a biological impairment rather than a behavioral phenomenon, as contemporary psychologists do today. While disability theologian Miguel Romero admits that what Aquinas describes is similar to intellectual disability, he is careful to acknowledge the severity of what *amentia* implies: profound cognitive impairment.<sup>30</sup> Although *amentia* describes a narrower understanding of cognitive impairment, the term "intellectual disability" is valuable because it describes a broader spectrum of contemporary experiences.<sup>31</sup> It shows that all, even those with profound cognitive impairment, are welcome at God's Table.

Aquinas discusses the role of *amentia*, or "those who lack reason," in Part III, Question 80, Article 9 of the *Summa Theologica*, specifically in relation to the Eucharist. In this article, Aquinas considers and counters objections to including such individuals in the Eucharist. For Aquinas, devotion to the sacrament is crucial for receiving the Eucharist. However, this devotion is a spiritual, not an intellectual act.<sup>32</sup> Romero adds that for Aquinas, at baptism, all, including people with intellectual disabilities, are "supernaturally capacitated."<sup>33</sup> As *amentia* (those who

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<sup>30</sup> Romero, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Sarah Jean Barton's caution in using the term "intellectual disability" is helpful, and an exploration of deficiencies of the medical model of disability is warranted. See her discussion for a fuller, nuanced view of the term "intellectual disability." She writes, "I want to caution us that they are not sufficient in and of themselves. Defining disability from a medical perspective risks an overemphasis on negative notions of deficit and insufficiency. Medical definitions also fail to recognize the strikingly heterogeneous lived experiences of people with intellectual disabilities." (Sarah Jean Barton, *Becoming the Baptized Body: Disability and the Practice of Christian Community*, 4). For a historically comprehensive overview of the historical use of the term "intellectual disability" see C. F. Goodey, *A History of Intelligence and Intellectual Disability: The Shaping of Psychology in Early Modern Europe* (London: Routledge, 2011).

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 80, a. 9.

<sup>33</sup> Romero, 207.

lack reason) are baptized, God "moves them by contemplation to form an inner word, from which they are free to burst forth in spiritual acts of love."<sup>34</sup>

Thus, as God counts us among His people at baptism, so too, we are all invited to His Table. God infuses baptized believers with the grace and knowledge of God that empower us to flourish in spiritual life and virtue. This meal is our inheritance, our birthright, disabled or not. Aquinas writes, "For since every Christian, from the fact that he is baptized, is admitted to the Lord's table, he may not be robbed of his right."<sup>35</sup> To prevent people with intellectual disability from the Table is to cast them out of the Eucharistic community and deny their full membership of the body of Christ.

### **3. UDL Principles Applied to Aquinas**

As Christ's body, the Eucharist engages believers in God's story. Thomas Aquinas' theology of the Eucharist lays the groundwork for applying the UDL principle of engagement. Engagement captures interest and "sustains effort"<sup>36</sup> so that all individuals can meaningfully participate. The Eucharist engages believers in the Christian story of life, death, and resurrection and invites us into God's narrative of healing. Disability theologian Amos Yong writes, "Christ heals the brokenness of our individual bodies precisely through including each person around the Eucharistic fellowship regardless of his or her in/ability."<sup>37</sup>

Aquinas' theology of the Eucharist also lays the groundwork for UDL's principle of representation through devotion or spiritual desire. Representation invites participation and understanding by presenting information in various ways beyond traditional intellectual or verbal forms. By offering multiple means of representation, we do not just preach Christ's radical

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 80, a. 6, resp.

<sup>36</sup> CAST, "Consideration 7.3: Nurture Joy and Play," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 12.

<sup>37</sup> Amos Yong, *Theology and Down Syndrome* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2007), 175.

hospitality at the Table; we practice it. Don Sayers writes, "When liturgy lacks hospitality, it forfeits the right to speak to the world... We need a hospitable time and space where stories can be heard and told, and life can be shared deeply. Without that, we are all diminished."<sup>38</sup> Because Aquinas lays the theological groundwork for representation, we can explore varied ways to communicate spiritual desire.

Lastly, Aquinas' theology of the Eucharist practically reiterates the UDL principle of action and expression. Through varied means, believers communicate their devotion to the sacrament. Action and expression help us see our bias toward intellectual and verbal communication in the liturgy. UDL principles show, as Sayers writes, that our liturgy is not simply about using the right words. Liturgy creates a world through "what we see, the silence, what we taste, how we are especially related, how we move, and above all, who is present. For we need one another to learn this non-verbal symbolic language."<sup>39</sup> If love needs no words, neither does faith. The Table is not just a place for those who can explain it verbally but for all who desire it. AAC, PECS, and non-verbal gestures are welcome in the Kingdom of God. The liturgy creates windows into a Kingdom where all faith is honored.

## **B. John Calvin on Intellectual Disability and the Eucharist**

Three hundred years after Aquinas, John Calvin, a 16th-century French theologian and Genevan Reformer, wrote his monumental work *The Institutes of Christian Religion*, where he offers a pastoral view of the Eucharist. He begins by defining the sacrament as an external sign of God's promise to His people. After defining the sacrament, Calvin moves to a theology of

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<sup>38</sup> Don Sayers, "Toward a Spirituality of Inclusiveness," in *Human Disability and the Service of God: Reassessing Religious Practice*, ed. Nancy Eiesland and Don Sayers (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1998), 27.

<sup>39</sup> Sayers, 26.

accommodation, writing that the Eucharist is for all people who receive it in faith. After establishing what the sacrament is and who receives it, Calvin shows how God reveals Himself as Father, Teacher, and Creator. Calvin's theology of the Eucharist, coupled with UDL principles, invites all believers to God's Table.

## **1. Calvin's Eucharistic Theology: Defining the Sacrament as God's Promise**

While Aquinas saw the sacraments as tools for grace, Calvin saw them as ways to confirm God's Word. God's invitation is three steps: Word, sacrament, and faith. He writes, "The Lord teaches and instructs us by his Word; secondly, he confirms it by his sacraments. Finally, he illumines our minds by the light of his Holy Spirit and opens our hearts for the Word and sacraments to enter in."<sup>40</sup> For Calvin, God comes down to us to reveal Himself through Word and Sacrament. In both, God is present. When Scripture is read and preached, we hear His voice. When we participate in the sacrament, we experience signs of the Scriptural Word.

## **2. Calvin's Theology of Accommodation: The Sacrament for All People**

By defining his understanding of the sacraments, Calvin establishes his theology of accommodation by explaining who the sacraments are for. God made flesh is God made accessible to His people. God desires to be known by us despite our weaknesses. Calvin writes, "By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness."<sup>41</sup> And for this weakness, Calvin continues, God "tempers himself to our capacity that, since we are creatures who always creep on the ground, cleave to the flesh, and do not think about or even

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<sup>40</sup> John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 2, Book 4, Chapter 14, Section 8 (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1960), 1284.

<sup>41</sup> Calvin, 1278.

conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements."<sup>42</sup>

This accommodation is a part of God's intention to restore humanity to communion with Himself and with each other despite our weaknesses. God takes ordinary elements like bread and wine to communicate Himself to us. Liturgical theologian and Calvin scholar Julie Canlis writes, "If through worship God raises us 'step by step,' then sacraments are the physical steps of the ladder."<sup>43</sup> God's accommodation dignifies our nature and makes God accessible to all His people. If God has already provided a ladder, we can offer multiple avenues for people with all abilities to engage in the sacraments meaningfully. Using Calvin's pastoral lens to read the UDL principles of engagement, representation, and action and expression, we present a way for believers to see God as Father, Teacher, and Creator through Word and Sacrament in practical ways.

### **3. UDL Principles Applied to Calvin: God as Father, Teacher, and Creator**

In the Eucharist, God as Father has come down to us to show us our place in His story. God's invitation mirrors the UDL principle of engagement, which cultivates participation through choice, autonomy, joy, and play. Just as God the Father nourishes us with His Table, UDL encourages learners "to sustain effort and persistence"<sup>44</sup> so that all can fully participate and thrive. As a kind Father, we are baptized into His family. Calvin writes that God is concerned "for his offspring, he undertakes also to nourish us throughout the course of our life."<sup>45</sup> God welcomes all His children to this spiritual banquet, "wherein Christ attests Himself to be the

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Julie Canlis, *Calvin's Ladder: A Spiritual Theology of Ascent and Ascension* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2010), 238.

<sup>44</sup> CAST, "Consideration 7.3: Nurture Joy and Play," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 12.

<sup>45</sup> Calvin, 1359-1360.

life-giving bread upon which our souls feed."<sup>46</sup> God is our Father, and we are His children. We are called His own people at our baptism. Thus, Calvin writes, believers "gather great assurance and delight from this Sacrament; in it they have a witness of our growth into one body with Christ such that whatever is His can be called our own."<sup>47</sup> He seeks to care for and nurture us as His own. In this adoption, all that is God's is now ours. God makes us a part of God's story so that we can respond with meaningful, active participation. By cultivating delight, the Eucharist functions as the UDL principle of engagement. UDL creates nurturing environments in which all belong. By cultivating joy, His Table helps us "sustain effort"<sup>48</sup> by persisting longer, engaging deeper, and developing love for God and His people.

God as Teacher in Calvin's theology of the Eucharist engages believers into God's story. The UDL principle of representation uses stories and experiences to draw learners into deeper understanding. In the same way, Calvin's theology of accommodation brings this story to His people. His theology of accommodation in the Eucharist shows how worship enacts the UDL principle of representation. Calvin writes that in the Eucharist, God adapts to us and uses ordinary, material objects of bread and wine to communicate His story. The UDL principle of representation honors all modes of communication to create "space for multiple ways of knowing."<sup>49</sup> As UDL provides multiple avenues for representation, Calvin shows that through the Eucharist, God has provided multiple ways to tell and participate in His story.

Calvin imagines God as a Teacher who gently leads us "by the hand,"<sup>50</sup> (much like Junia did) using material things, like bread and wine, to accommodate our "fleshly"<sup>51</sup> human nature

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<sup>46</sup> Calvin, 1360.

<sup>47</sup> Calvin, 1361-1362.

<sup>48</sup> CAST, "Consideration 7.3: Nurture Joy and Play," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 12.

<sup>49</sup> CAST, "Guideline 3: Design options for building knowledge," 21.

<sup>50</sup> Calvin, 1281.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

and limitations. He writes, "Augustine calls the sacrament 'a visible word' for the reason that it represents God's promises as painted in a picture and sets them before our sight, portrayed graphically and in the manner of images."<sup>52</sup> As a Teacher, God gives us images to help us understand who He is. As the UDL principle of representation invites educators to present information to clarify "language and symbols,"<sup>53</sup> Calvin's sacramental theology shows that God has done much the same in the Eucharist. As a gentle Teacher, Calvin writes, God shows us "its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our capacity...just as bread and wine sustain physical life, so our souls are fed by Christ."<sup>54</sup> As the UDL principle of representation encourages flexibility in presenting content, Calvin's understanding of the Eucharist highlights God's willingness to use tangible, accessible means to reach all His people. The Eucharist makes God's message more than words. We see, touch, and taste this spiritual feast drawing us deeper into His story.

As the UDL principle of action and expression encourages learners to respond in varied ways, Calvin also shows that believers respond in delight to God's creation in similarly varied ways. Calvin writes, "It is no small honor that God for our sake has so magnificently adorned the world, so that we may not be spectators of this beauteous theater, but also enjoy the multiplied abundance and variety of good things which are presented to us in it."<sup>55</sup> Calvin instructs us not to merely gloss over creation—but to "ponder them at length, turn them over in our mind faithfully and recollect them repeatedly."<sup>56</sup> God enjoys His creation in its varied and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

<sup>53</sup> CAST, "Checkpoint 2.1: Clarify vocabulary, symbols, and language structures," 20.

<sup>54</sup> Calvin, 1361.

<sup>55</sup> John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, "Psalm 104:31," trans. James Anderson, vol. 4 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1843), 169.

<sup>56</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, 225. 1.14.21.

beautiful abundance; why shouldn't we? The Eucharist invites all of God's people to participate fully, reflecting the diverse ways in which God's creation is celebrated.

Liturgical theologian W. David Taylor, in his book, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, argues for an "active and sensory engagement of the sensory riches of creation."<sup>57</sup> God created the world. The depths of the oceans and birds of the air teem with life and diversity. Why should we expect God to make humanity, with the variety of neurological and behavioral experiences, to be any different?<sup>58</sup> If God's creation shows its beauty in varied ways, it is only right to respond with our own diverse and joyful expressions: vocal and physical movements of delight. Our joy in God's creation calls for a richer, deeper liturgy. The UDL principle of action and expression helps us to express our bodies and voices to embody this joy.

This suggests that liturgy, particularly the Eucharist, must include and celebrate those with and without disabilities who embody joy in a diversity of ways. This diversity of actions and expressions are true responses to God's beauty. Rather than viewing diverse expressions as disruptions, we should consider whether our understanding of reverence is shaped more by cultural norms and expectations than by this vision of God's kingdom, which calls for a united Body of Christ.

### **C. A Critical Assessment: Aquinas and Calvin Offer Complementary Frameworks on Sacramental Access**

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<sup>57</sup> W. David Taylor, *The Theater of God's Glory: Calvin, Creation, and the Liturgical Arts*, (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company), 73.

<sup>58</sup> Rochelle Sheuermann, "Disability and God's Mission: An Invitation to Evangelism" (presentation at *Symposium on Disability and Ministry 2024*, Western Theological Seminary, Holland, MI, July 13, 2024)

Calvin's doctrine of creation supports Eucharistic belonging. Yet, Calvin's requirement<sup>59</sup> that children recite the catechism before receiving the sacraments excludes people with intellectual disabilities. Disability theologian Deborah Creamer notes that this effectively limits "access to the sacraments to those who are 'smart enough' or who have particular capacities for memorization and recall."<sup>60</sup> In this, we see a tension in Calvin's thought. On the one hand, he advocates for the Christian community to "bind ourselves to all the duties of love"<sup>61</sup> at the Eucharist. Yet on the other hand, with Calvin's requirements, we functionally only invite those with the intellectual capacities to participate.<sup>62</sup>

In this way, Aquinas' understanding of instrumental causality (discussed above) pushes at the tension in Calvin's sacramental theology. As I have argued, Aquinas' emphasis on God's initiative on the effectiveness of the sacrament. Aquinas's assertion that people with intellectual disabilities are "supernaturally capacitated"<sup>63</sup> through baptism challenges Calvin's intellectual gatekeeping of the Eucharist. Aquinas' framework allows all of God's people to participate as full members of His body.

The historical and theological exploration of Aquinas and Calvin has shown us the tension of applying *lex credendi*, our doctrine, to *lex orandi*, Eucharistic participation for people with intellectual disabilities. These two sides of the liturgical triangle must be balanced by *lex vivendi*, lived experience. *Lex vivendi* bridges the gap between doctrine and practice, demonstrating how theology is not only understood in theory but also embodied in Eucharistic

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<sup>59</sup> Calvin: "when the child has been well enough instructed to pass the Catechism." John Calvin, *Theological Treatises* (ed. J.K.S. Reid; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1954), 69.

<sup>60</sup> Deborah Creamer, "John Calvin and Disability," in *Disability in the Christian Tradition: A Reader*, ed. Brian Brock and John Swinton (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2012), 175.

<sup>61</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of Christian Religion*, vol. 4, 1422.

<sup>62</sup> Creamer, 175.

<sup>63</sup> Romero, 207.

belonging for people with intellectual disabilities. The next section explores the lived experience of a case study that applies both UDL principles and the sacramental theologies of Aquinas and Calvin.

#### **IV. Practical Application: Integrating UDL Principles into Eucharistic Rite**

As I have argued, Aquinas's framework and Calvin's insight support an inclusive Eucharistic rite founded upon UDL principles. However, without *lex vivendi*, lived experience, doctrine and educational principles become mere abstractions—concepts we discuss but never put into practice. I longed for my daughter to become a part of our Eucharistic community. I developed a PECS (Picture Exchange Communication System) to help her participate in the Eucharist. I also implemented a first-then board to show her choices have meaning. I used visual aids, specifically visual cards, to engage my daughter Junia in the Eucharist. This followed UDL's three principles: engagement, representation, and action and expression.

##### **A. Engagement: Autonomy and Choice in Worship**

The UDL principle of engagement "optimizes choice and autonomy" by nurturing "joy and play."<sup>64</sup> Aquinas expressed pastoral concerns about individuals with *amentia* (those who lack reason) receiving the Eucharist. Specifically, he worried about the risk of spitting out or vomiting the sacrament (profaning the sacrament) or offering it to someone who may not desire it.<sup>65</sup> This principle addresses these concerns, offering believers options to express their spiritual desire. I gave my daughter Junia visual cards representing two options—"pray for me" and "Eucharist." I set the Table for Junia. Because we were in Ordinary Time, I covered a small doll table with a

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<sup>64</sup> CAST, "Consideration 7.3: Nurture Joy and Play," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 12.

<sup>65</sup> Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, III, q. 80, a. 9.

green altar cloth and white communion linen. I set the Table as it was in the sanctuary, play-sized: two altar candles, a chalice, and a paten.<sup>66</sup> With unconsecrated elements,<sup>67</sup> I set the Table with a wafer, wine, and Junia's cards. Through these cards, I provided her with options to express her devotion. This approach, grounded in the sacramental theology of Aquinas and Calvin, displays UDL's principle of engagement by optimizing individual choices and autonomy. In her choices, a life that has "burst forth in spiritual acts of love"<sup>68</sup> is nourished by the Eucharist. As Calvin demonstrated, God takes ordinary elements in Junia's life, like doll tables, to communicate Himself to her. By setting her Table with play objects, I used the UDL principle of "nurturing joy and play."<sup>69</sup> God has spoken to Junia, and she responds.

## **B. Representation: Making Theological Concepts Accessible**

God invites Junia to His Table through play. The UDL principle of representation honors Junia and her communication. Representation supports multiple ways to interact with the world. It does this by presenting information through touch, sound, and sight. I created "space for multiple ways of knowing,"<sup>70</sup> introducing His Table through play. She was able to touch the altar cloth and communion linen. She smelled the wine. Junia beheld the wafer, turning it over and over in the light. As Calvin encouraged us, she did not merely gloss over these elements—but pondered them at length, turned them over in her mind faithfully, and recollected them repeatedly.<sup>71</sup> These visual aids provided Junia with concrete representations of spiritual realities, showing UDL's emphasis on multiple means of representation in practice. Because Aquinas laid

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<sup>66</sup> Altar Guild Manual, Anglican Church in North America, Anglican Diocese of the South, [https://adots.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Altar\\_Guild\\_Manual.pdf](https://adots.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/Altar_Guild_Manual.pdf), 16–17.

<sup>67</sup> These elements were unconsecrated because I was using them for teaching purposes.

<sup>68</sup> Romero, 207.

<sup>69</sup> CAST, "Consideration 7.3: Nurture Joy and Play," (Center for Applied Special Technology, 2024), 12.

<sup>70</sup> CAST, "Guideline 3: Design options for building knowledge," 21.

<sup>71</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles, vol. 1, 225. 1.14.21.

the theological foundation, I built multiple ways for Junia to understand and express her spiritual desire. The sacraments connect our earthly perspective to God's reality. The Eucharist, as Calvin explains, "shows its figure and image in visible signs best adapted to our small capacity."<sup>72</sup> The visual cards and play Eucharistic Table were bridges. They made complex theology tangible. These bridges allowed all of God's people, including Junia, to participate as full members of Christ's body.

### **C. Action and Expression: Supporting Participation Through Structured Choices**

Junia responded to the Eucharist in diverse and beautiful ways of delight, with vocal and physical expressions of joy. Using the UDL principle of action and expression, I honored the ways that Junia occupied and moved in space by "physically embodying learning (singing, walking, standing up)."<sup>73</sup> When she received the Eucharist, she danced and shrieked with joy. I reiterated UDL's core themes and its principle of action and expression. I then offered Junia a first-then board to clarify her choices. The board showed a sequence of events. The priest would bless her if she chose the "pray for me" card. If she picked the "Eucharist" card, she would get the wafer.

This structured approach helped Junia understand the significance of her choices. It provided her with immediate, concrete outcomes that reinforced her agency in worship. This approach was supported by UDL principles and founded in Aquinas' and Calvin's sacramental theology. As we have seen in Calvin, the purpose of the Eucharist is not only to commune with God but also to delight in Him.<sup>74</sup> By using the first-then board alongside the visual cards and playing at the Eucharist table, people of all abilities can interact with the liturgy through tangible,

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<sup>72</sup> Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, vol. 2, Book 4, 1278.

<sup>73</sup> CAST, "Vary and honor the methods for response, navigation, and movement," 25.

<sup>74</sup> Calvin, 1361-1362.

structured elements. As W. David Taylor argued, "Because our pleasure in creation is grounded in God's pleasure,"<sup>75</sup> God invites us to respond in varied acts of joy and praise. Similarly, in Aquinas' sacramental theology, devotion to the sacrament does not require verbal assent. It does not require intellectual acumen but only spiritual desire. His sacramental theology opens up the possibility of spiritual desire communicated through AAC or PECS, as we have demonstrated with Junia. This approach honors non-verbal and diverse forms of communication as authentic expressions of faith. If love and faith need no words, the Table welcomes all baptized believers who seek it.

Applying UDL to the Eucharistic rite invites God's people to His Table, restoring balance within the liturgical triangle through *lex vivendi*—lived experience. This approach honors the historical foundations of the Eucharist while ensuring that it is accessible to all. Drawing on the sacramental theologies of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, my approach does not seek to create something new, but rather to extend the Eucharist for those who have long been excluded. In doing so, we respect the tradition of the Eucharistic rite while amplifying the perspectives of those often unnoticed, like Junia, and balancing doctrine, worship, and lived participation in a way that fosters belonging.

## **V. Conclusion**

The liturgy of the Book of Common Prayer (BCP) beautifully integrates Thomas Aquinas' and John Calvin's theology to UDL's goals of inclusion. In this collect, the BCP prays, "O God, who wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of human nature: Grant that we may share the divine life of him who humbled himself to share our

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<sup>75</sup> Taylor, 138.

humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.” Aquinas shows us that God as the principal cause of grace in the sacraments is also the One who wonderfully created humanity in His image. Calvin shows us that God has sacrificed Himself by His blood so that our nature may be restored. Aquinas’ sacramental framework reveals that God desires to share His divine life through the Eucharist with His Church, regardless of intellectual capacity. Calvin shows us through his sacramental theology that God has humbled Himself and became like us to dignify and restore our humanity. Prayer book Anglicans proclaim *lex orandi, lex credendi* and *lex vivendi* –we pray what we believe. Yet, Universal Design for Learning has shown us how to become a Church that not only believes and prays for inclusion but practices it. May we become a Church that is not only built on orthodoxy, following the tradition of our Church fathers, but that we may be a place of orthopraxy—welcoming, loving, and inviting all of God’s people to His Table.