

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

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Thesis: This paper proposes that Universal Design for Learning, read alongside the sacramental theologies of Thomas Aquinas and John Calvin, reveals how the embodied witness of people with intellectual and developmental disabilities can reorient the Church toward richer Eucharistic belonging.

Introduction: A Story of Invitation

This 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. My work with this paper and in disability theology began as I asked: **who belongs at this Table?** I suggest that employing Universal Design for Learning (UDL) is not just an accommodation—but a way we can continue and remain faithful to the Christian witness.

Theological Framework: Lex Orandi, Lex Credendi, Lex Vivendi

As a framework, I integrate three leges (laws) *lex orandi* (prayer and rite), *lex credendi*, and *lex vivendi*¹:

- **Lex Orandi:** (How we pray – liturgy)
- **Lex Credendi:** (What we believe – doctrine)
- **Lex Vivendi:** (How we live – ethics & practice)

Our worship should not only be beautiful and compelling—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 establish Christ's Kingdom in the world (*lex vivendi*).

¹ Daniel J. Handschy, Donna R. Hawk-Reinhard, and Marshall E. Crossnoe, eds., *Eucharist-Shaped Church: Prayer, Theology, Mission* (New York: Lexington Books/Fortress Academic, 2022).

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) in the Eucharistic Liturgy

UDL offers three core principles to shape Eucharistic belonging:

1. Engagement

- Cultivates joy and play.
- Alexander Schmemann: this meal invites us "to touch other worlds."²

2. Representation

- Multiple modes of communication: sensory, symbolic, and embodied.
- "Liturgy speaks measuredly and melodiously; it employs formal, rhythmic gestures; it is clothed in colors and garments foreign to everyday life." (Guardini).³

3. Action & Expression

- It is through this liturgy we are formed to be people of praise.
- This Eucharist, is the end of all of humanity's hunger and finds itself in praise and thanksgiving---*eucharistia* of our Creator.

Theological Grounding: Aquinas & Calvin

Thomas Aquinas (13th c.)

- **What: Sacraments are not a reward for our faith.**

- Principle cause: God is the prime actor in sacraments:
- Instrumental cause: The Eucharist—the bread and wine—serves as **an instrumental cause of grace**, similar to how a sculptor uses marble to create a masterpiece.

² Alexander Schmemann, *Eucharist: Sacrament of Kingdom* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1987), 47.

³ Romano, Guardini, *The Church and the Catholic, and the Spirit of the Liturgy* (Sheed and Ward: New York, 1935).

- **Who:** All baptized persons, God, “moves them by contemplation to form an inner word, from which they are free to burst forth in spiritual acts of love.”⁴
- **How:** Spiritual devotion, not intellect, matters. **If love needs no words, neither does faith.**

John Calvin (16th c.)

- **What:** Sacraments are signs of God’s promise.
- **Who:** "By this means God provides first for our ignorance and dullness, then for our weakness." 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 conceive of anything spiritual, he condescends to lead us to himself even by these earthly elements."⁵
- **How:** UDL's engagement principle fits Calvin's vision of a world rich in sensory invitation.

Tensions & Complementarity

- Calvin’s catechetical requirements limit access.⁶
- Whereas Aquinas gives us a metaphysical framework—Calvin's doctrine of accommodation follows in the footsteps of the Fathers:
- Calvin emphasizes God's desire for nearness-- a God who desires to be known through the senses, through creation, and ultimately through the sacraments

⁴ Miguel Romero, *St. Thomas Aquinas on Disability and Profound Cognitive Impairment* (ThD diss., Duke Divinity School, 2012),

⁵ 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), 1278.

⁶ 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.

Lex Vivendi: Junia communicates Eucharistic desire through AAC, visuals, and joyful embodiment.

- **Engagement:** Visual cards (“Pray for me” / “Eucharist”) empowered her to choose.
- **Representation:** Play altar with real elements connected her senses to spiritual realities.
- **Action & Expression:** She received the sacrament with shrieks of joy and dancing—worship in her language.

Conclusion

“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 humanity, your Son Jesus Christ our Lord.”
(Book of Common Prayer)

- 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.

When someone like Junia leads us to the Table—may we learn to follow.
