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The Worshiping Body.
Chenu, Liturgy and Sacraments
Collegeville 2025

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Reviewer

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Review

Joris GELDHOF et al. (eds.), *The Worshiping Body. Chenu, Liturgy and Sacraments*, Collegeville 2025.

STEPHAN TAUTZ

The book offers a distinctive and highly effective introduction to the French Dominican Marie-Dominique Chenu (1895–1990), a theologian who, though perhaps counted among the lesser-known contributors to the *ressourcement* movement, played a pivotal role in shaping twentieth-century Catholic thought. He is widely recognized as the originator of the notion of “the signs of the times” (*Gaudium et Spes* 4), a concept that profoundly influenced the theology underlying the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the subsequent renewal of ecclesiology and sacramental life.

The volume is organized around five of Chenu’s essays on liturgy and the sacraments, made available here for the first time in English. These texts are complemented by seven scholarly contributions that engage Chenu’s thought. While only a few of the authors are recognized Chenu specialists, the majority write as experts in the thematic fields addressed in the five essays, which enables them to assess critically – and to highlight convincingly – the contemporary relevance of Chenu’s theological insights. Framed by an introduction and a concise afterward, the collection situates Chenu’s work within a broader set of current discussions and demonstrates its enduring significance for today’s theological discourse.

That the editors chose to foreground Chenu's theology of liturgy and the sacraments is an excellent decision for several reasons. First, they convincingly demonstrate that the sacramental dimension pulls together many strands of Chenu's thought that are too often treated in isolation; this makes the volume a particularly effective point of entry into his work.

Second, this focus represents a genuinely new angle even within Chenu scholarship, where his contributions to liturgical and sacramental theology have not previously been explored in such an integrated way. Finally, concentrating on these themes creates a bridge to current developments in contemporary theology – both to the ongoing debates about liturgical reform and to the emerging efforts to recover the constructive potential of sacramental theology today.

After providing an initial overall assessment of the volume, I will outline its structure only in broad strokes. The aim is not to offer a comprehensive account but rather to give readers sufficient orientation to form their own judgment and to identify which of the multiple interpretive pathways into Chenu's thought opened by these contributions they may wish to pursue further.

Before turning to the individual contributions of the volume, a few remarks on the five texts by Chenu are in order. As noted, these articles appear here for the first time in English translation – a contribution that is valuable in its own right, since they are not available in other languages, such as German, and thus become accessible to a significantly wider readership. Chenu wrote these pieces between 1947 and 1974, spanning a period that includes both the formative years leading up to (the theology of) the Second Vatican Council and the immediate postconciliar phase, when questions of implementation and the early reception of the Council's reforms were at the forefront. The five articles are known within specialist circles, though broader reception has largely focused on the fifth text included here, "For a Sacramental Anthropology" (1974), which gained additional influence through Chenu's students – Edward Schillebeeckx among them. The editors' selection from Chenu's extensive writings on these themes is judicious and effective: It offers both substantial and thematic coverage that reflects the breadth of his thinking on liturgy and the sacraments. As with any such project, one might point to other publications that could also have merited inclusion. In this case, "Evange-

lizzazione e sacramento nell'incontro tra la Chiesa e il mondo di oggi"¹ (1972) would have been a noteworthy candidate. Precisely because it treats evangelization, the article extends beyond its immediate subject matter and opens a perspective on the postconciliar possibilities of liturgy – an angle that, in light of persistent critiques of the liturgical reform, especially from traditionalist circles, remains surprisingly underexplored. Regarding the presentation of Chenu's texts, the editors have placed particular emphasis on accessibility. This is evident in several aspects of their work. First, they have included an internal citation system with paragraph numbers, which is used throughout the volume for cross-referencing. Second, the translation while addressing the usual challenges of rendering complex French into English, simplifying sentence structures that would otherwise be unintelligible, also reflects a deliberate choice to use gender-neutral language. Third, the apparatus of notes has been carefully revised: the editors have preserved Chenu's original footnotes where they exist, replacing citations of French editions with references to corresponding English editions when available, and adding a number of explanatory notes throughout the texts, particularly to aid in contextualizing them. Ultimately, this approach makes it also possible to read only a specific article by Chenu, perhaps in combination with an essay that engages with a related theme.

This brings us to the remaining contributions of the volume, which Tom McLean briefly introduces alongside the usual editorial explanations. Beyond this, the essay functions as a concise thematic frame, organizing the volume around three key fields in Chenu's work that emerge both in the five reprinted articles and in the subsequent essays: time and historicity; the body as a foundational human dimension; and the uniting of the sacred and the profane, that is, Chenu's profound rejection of any dualism between the sacred and the profane. Immediately following this "Introduction" (1–14), and functioning almost as a second introduction to Chenu, is

¹ Marie-Dominique CHENU, Evangelizzazione e sacramenti nell'incontro tra la Chiesa e il mondo di oggi, in: *Evangelizzazione e sacramenti. Ricerche avviate in due Chiese locali Torino-Roma*, Turin 1972, 95–120. Another interesting publication might be *Id.*, Profundidad del mundo – Sacramentalidad del mundo. Santo Tomás de Aquino y San Bonaventura, in: *Ciencia tomista* 65 (1974) 183–189.

a knowledgeable and engaging short intellectual biography, entitled “Chenu in Context” (15–29), written by a recognized expert on the topic, Mary Kate Holman,² which “aims to contextualize themes that surface repeatedly in Chenu’s essays on liturgy” (15). Against this background, we may now turn to the essays themselves and to the thematic discussions that unfold around them. More generally regarding the individual contributions, the authors first read the five essays and then participated together in a seminar held in Tilburg in Spring 2024. Their chapters engage with all or only selected essays, depending on their chosen focus. It may be noted that the volume does not move beyond this initial level of conversation: there are no cross-references to other chapters or to the discussions that took place there.³ Within the framework of the project, however, and given that each of the essays spans only about eleven pages, this limited depth does not constitute a significant drawback. It goes without saying that a brief overview cannot do justice to the many insights and significant conceptual bridges the different essays offer for advancing contemporary theological inquiry.

In his contribution entitled “A Faith That Holds to the Body” (109–119), Olivier Praud reflects on the significance Chenu attributes to the bodily nature of the human person. He elucidates what, in Chenu’s view, animates his “sacramental anthropology”, situating it within the broader twentieth-century anthropological turn. Praud highlights Chenu’s proposal for “an itinerary where the most spiritual and the most corporeal are united” (110), thereby inviting readers “to consider corporeality as the starting point for any theology of the liturgy” (110).

Stephan van Erp opens his essay “Liturgical Theology as Fundamental Theology” (121–133) by asking whether “liturgy [can] be regarded as revelational” (121). He argues that reading Chenu as a fundamental theologian enables one to answer this question in the affirmative and to make a case for including the liturgy as a *locus theologicus* within funda-

² See Mary Kate HOLMAN, Marie-Dominique Chenu. Catholic Theology for a Changing World, South Bend, IN 2025.

³ For instance, Olivier Praud characterizes Chenu as “a perfect reader of Thomas Aquinas” (114), whereas Harm Goris, in his concluding remarks, maintains that “from a historical point of view, Chenu has not been loyal to Aquinas’s thought about the sacraments” (158).

mental theology. Van Erp presents Chenu’s *theologia prima*, articulated under the motto “Truth Resides in Mystery” (129), as a constructive counter to excessively rationalistic approaches within fundamental theology.

In “Contemporary Challenges for Sacramental Theology” (135–146), Joris Geldhof reflects on a similarly fundamental question: what it means to move from a theology of the sacraments to doing theology sacramentally. Within his exploration, Geldhof also engages with the well-known theme from Romano Guardini concerning human’s “Liturgiefähigkeit”, extending it wittily to the notion of “Sakramenten(un)fähigkeit” (141). Building on Chenu, Geldhof ultimately argues that “a strong realistic sacramental vision seems crucial both for the (future of the) church and for a global and truly inclusive humanity” (144).

Harm Goris’s contribution entitled “An Interaction with Aquinas’s Theology” (147–149) critically reassesses the ongoing relevance of Chenu’s then innovative hermeneutical reading of Thomas Aquinas, originally developed in opposition to the ahistoricity of Neo-Thomism. At the center of Chenu’s interpretation stands the Neoplatonic *exitus–reditus* scheme, mediated through Pseudo-Dionysius, which Chenu employs as an overarching key to the structure of the *Summa Theologiae*. As Goris summarizes, “the First Part of the *Summa* explains how all emanates from God. The Second Part, how all returns to God through human activity. And the Third Part gives the contingent design of the return.” (150) But as Goris holds, this focus ultimately results in Chenu losing sight of some of Aquinas’s key reflections on the sacraments (1) as signs (and not as symbols) and (2) on the sacraments as remedy for (original) sin.

In his contribution “The Symbolic Gesture, Moved by Mystery” (161–173), Willem Marie Speelman conversely turns away from a sacramental theology centered on signs and instead examines Chenu’s preference for approaching the sacraments as symbols intrinsically ordered to mystery. Engaging a wide range of interlocutors, including Gabriel Marcel and Giorgio Agamben, Speelman explores the “symbolic gesture” of the liturgical celebration. Building on Varro’s distinction between the verbs *facere* (making), *agere* (doing), and *gerere* as a third and distinct mode of action, Speelman conceptualizes gesture as “the performance of an act, to be recognized as belonging to another actor, with the intention of evoking a different reality before the eyes of witnesses” (161). To clarify this

account, Speelman draws an illuminating comparison with musical semiotics: Just as musical performance makes present a reality that cannot be exhaustively translated into conceptual meaning, so the liturgical gesture symbolically renders the mystery (i. e. God) present.

In "Perspectives from Feminist Theology" (175–186), Susan K. Roll offers an important critical evaluation of Chenu's vision from a feminist-theological perspective. While noting that the "distinction between liturgies and paraliturgies used by Chenu in the 1947 article has long since disappeared" (177), Roll does not treat this as a liability but instead identifies significant correlations between Chenu's attentiveness to the cultural and contextual conditions of theological reflection and key concerns of feminist liturgical scholarship, as references to scholars such as Teresa Berger illustrate. Structurally, Roll organizes her evaluation around four interrelated aspects of Chenu's thought in these articles: his understanding of symbolism, his account of the nature of tradition (and Tradition), his emphasis on the inculcation of the liturgy, and his commitment to *ressourcement*. Taken together, Roll's analysis both critically retrieves and productively extends Chenu's insights within the horizon of contemporary feminist theology.

Samuel Goyvaerts highlights in "Pastoral Liturgical Perspectives" (187–199) that "although neither a pastoral theologian nor a liturgist, in his reflections on liturgy and anthropology one can find interesting ideas when reading from a contemporary pastoral liturgical perspective" (187). In a first step, Goyvaerts surveys those passages in the five published essays in which Chenu explicitly addresses a pastoral-liturgical dimension. Goyvaerts then identifies three recurring themes in Chenu's broader corpus: his theory of symbol, the connection he draws between liturgy and imagination, and his engagement with the anthropological turn, particularly in the bodily dimension of the human. On this basis, Goyvaerts argues that Chenu's attention to the body offers a framework for moving beyond a narrow focus on liturgical texts toward a wider consideration of the embodied actions that accompany and enact them.

Finally, in his brief "Afterword: The Myriad Chenu – Rereading the World as Sacrament" (201–204), Karim Schelkens considers how the sacramental dimension weaves together numerous strands of Chenu's

thought – connections that, as he notes, have often remained underappreciated in the secondary literature.

Taken as a whole, the volume leaves the reader with a strong and compelling impression that supports the guiding intuition of the book, namely that Chenu, as an author of *ressourcement*, remains a valuable resource for our time. In the face of all forms of de(con)struction – not only postcolonial (11) – we are confronted with a "need for rediscovering holistic perspectives of humanity, world, and cosmos" (204). The concept of sacramentality is especially promising in this regard.⁴ With a slight wink, one might even speak of a kind of return to *ressourcement* as a source for a "new" *nouvelle théologie*.

⁴ See e. g. Hans Gustafson's concept of pansacramentalism, in Hans GUSTAFSON, *Finding All Things in God. Pansacramentalism and Doing Theology Interreligiously*, Lutterworth 2017.