NEITHER FORTUNE NOR FATE

The Tarot as Sacrament, Sacramental, and Means of Grace

A THEOLOGICAL APOLOGIA

CASEY DAS

LUX DIVINA PRESS

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Rev. Casey Das, D.Min., Ph.D.

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Abstract

This apologia argues that tarot, when blessed and incorporated into the church's prayer, constitutes a true sacrament and a useful sacramental. Its use is a prophetic and pastoral practice distinct from fortune-telling. The practice does not create union with God. Rather, its purpose is recognition: it helps a person perceive the Christ, who is already their deepest nature, enables this love to take form in human life. This argument proceeds from within the mystical, creation-centered stream of the Christian tradition, which regards creation as the first book of God, understands salvation as participation in divine life, sees the one Light of God shining through many windows, and affirms that God will be all in all. Its theology shows that the church has always received grace through material signs and has never fixed the number of the means of grace. Tarot meets every criterion by which the churches recognize a sacramental; in the wider and older sense of the word, it is also a sacrament of encounter with God. Its history situates the practice within the biblical and ecclesial tradition of seeking God's word through signs, where prophecy speaks so that people may turn. It interprets historic objections to divination as objections that the practice itself shares. Its pastoral account explains what the practice does for the spirit and psyche, how it is used and safeguarded, and where it belongs in the church's longstanding engagement with spiritual warfare. Its civic conclusion follows from these arguments. A sacramental act of prayer and pastoral care constitutes religious expression and is entitled to the recognition and protection that religious liberty extends to every sacrament and sacramental. The practice is neither entertainment nor fortune-telling, any more than confession, baptism, anointing with oil, or the Eucharist is. It should be recognized as both a sacrament and a sacramental, without requiring any church to adopt it. Rather, it asks that a church, minister, or faithful Christian be free to retain it wherever it bears good fruit, and that the practice be honored for what it is.

Statement of position

This apologia sets out and defends a theological position on the use of the tarot in Christian prayer, prophetic ministry, spiritual direction, and pastoral care. It is issued by an ordained priest whose ministry includes the practice described. Its grounds are Scripture, the churches' sacramental theology, the history of Christian devotion, and the church's pastoral experience, and it asks to be judged on those grounds.

Paper and ink hold no power of their own. When the cards take on religious meaning, it happens as with every holy thing in the Christian tradition: God gives grace through a material sign that the church has set apart by its prayer, and that grace is received in faith. Water, oil, bread, wine, icons, candles, and prayer beads belong to this order. So, rightly used, these cards do as well. They are instruments of worship, prophecy, and pastoral care, never of fortune-telling, and their use is an act of religious expression, owed the same protection as any other act of worship. Seven theses follow.

The first concerns signs and grace. God communicates grace through visible signs received in faith. Creation is the first and widest of these signs, and Christ, the Word through whom all things were made and who became flesh, is the sacrament of God in the world. Every holy sign the church has ever kept derives its meaning from him. Christ is the Divine giving itself expression, older than the stars, and Jesus of Nazareth is the one in whom that life is fully embodied, divine and human without confusion or separation. The same Christ dwells in every person as their deepest nature, waiting to be recognized and raised to life (Colossians 1:27; Galatians 4:19). God is in all things, and all things are in God, and a spark of the divine flame burns in every being.

Second, authority. The churches have never agreed on a fixed number of the means of grace, and each church orders its own rites and institutes its own sacramentals. No single communion can determine how grace may be received in another.

The third thesis names what the practice is. Blessed, set within prayer, and used for discernment, examen, prophetic ministry, spiritual direction, and pastoral care, the tarot is a true sacrament and a useful sacramental. In its matter and its ordered rite, it is a sacramental, a blessed sign that disposes the faithful to receive grace and sanctifies the occasions of life. In the event of encounter, when the word of God is joined to the sign and grace is given, it is a sacrament, in the wide sense in which the church has long spoken of the sacramental character of all creation. It is useful the way lectio divina, the

blessing of water, and the anointing of the sick are useful. Where it is kept, it serves the church's ministry and helps many of the faithful in their life with God. No church is required to adopt it. What it does is recognition and embodiment. It helps a person recognize the union that has always held them and give that love a human form. It should be recognized as a sacrament and a sacramental, and no Christian is required to receive it.

Prophecy is the subject of the fourth. The practice belongs to the prophetic tradition of Scripture and the church, in which God's word is spoken for the present so that people may turn, and any word about what may come depends on that turning. It seeks wisdom more than prediction. When it speaks of what may come, it speaks as the prophets and the wisdom writers did: of where a present path seems to lead, and at times of an impression held lightly. It never speaks of a fixed fate, never with certainty, and never for sale. It leaves the future open between God and the person who seeks God. It ought never to be named, judged, regulated, taxed, or ridiculed as fortune-telling or entertainment.

The fifth concerns power. The sacred table has true spiritual power to change lives and hearts and to bring the soul into communion with God. Some of that power is spiritual, working through prayer, discernment, repentance, and growth in the likeness of Christ. Some is psychospiritual, where image, memory, meaning, and healing meet. Kept with watchfulness and grounded in Christ, whose undivided love on the cross left the powers of division nothing to feed on, the table is a place where a soul's hidden bondage is brought into the light. The church's long warfare against all that diminishes the human person continues there, through presence, prayer, and love.

Liberty follows. A true sacrament and a useful sacramental, kept apart from fortune-telling, constitute an exercise of religion and ought to be recognized and protected as religious expression under the liberty of conscience and the freedom of religion. An ordained minister has a right, grounded in ordination and conscience, to keep the practice in personal devotion and to offer it in pastoral care, and those who seek it have a corresponding right to receive it. No church need adopt the practice, and none should be prevented from keeping it. In the United States, the First Amendment offers two grounds of protection, the free exercise of religion and freedom of speech.

Last, reverence. Cards used this way are owed the reverence due to any holy instrument. The same reverence is owed to the sacred signs other religious traditions keep in prayer, since the one Light has never left any people without a witness (Acts 14:17).

Claims like these carry obligations. A practice within the Christian tradition must be practiced honestly. It promises no outcomes and makes no forecasts. It offers the care of souls through prayer, blessing, and companionship, and it welcomes medical and psychological care as partners whenever a person's healing requires them. Its fruits are open to examination, and this work asks that they be examined (Matthew 7:16).

Introduction

The question

The First Letter of Peter urges believers to be ready at all times to give an account of the hope within them to anyone who asks, and to do so with gentleness and reverence (1 Peter 3:15). This apologia is written in that spirit. Its topic is a practice now common inside and outside the churches but rarely given a theological account: the use of the tarot for prayer, discernment, prophetic ministry, and pastoral care.

Many Christians already pray with the cards. In several traditions, clergy have written openly about using them in devotion and spiritual direction, and a growing body of Christian literature treats the major images as stations on the soul's road to God.[1] Yet the churches' official cautions against divination, aimed at practices this work also rejects, are often applied to the sacred table without distinction, leaving its ministers without a recognized place in the church's life. In many places, civil authorities go further and treat every use of the cards as fortune-telling, a commercial category defined by the sale of predictions. Worship can end up regulated as though it were a trade in forecasts. Meanwhile, those who keep the practice are asked again and again, by bishops, church boards, chaplaincy committees, families, and neighbors, to explain what they are doing, and they need a coherent answer.

The work poses a set of questions. What is a sacrament, and who may say so? Can a deck of blessed images be a means of grace, and if so, in what sense? How is the practice related to the prophetic tradition of Scripture and the church, and why is it not fortune-telling? How do the historic objections of the churches bear on it? What does it do in a human life, spiritually and psychospiritually, and how does it relate to the church's long engagement with spiritual warfare? And what follows for the liberty of those who keep it?

What happens at the table

It helps to see the practice before judging it. Someone comes in and is welcomed. Before anything else, the minister states the time, explains the limits of confidentiality, and tells the person they may decline the images, stop at any point, and decline the blessing at the end. A candle is lit. After a pause, a short prayer is offered. Then the minister listens, sometimes for the whole hour, and many sessions never go further than that. If the person wants to look at what they carry through an image, one to three cards are laid down, and the person

speaks first: what they notice and what it stirs. The minister answers with questions, not pronouncements. Near the end, the person chooses one small, real step, such as a conversation, some rest, a request for help, or a repair. A blessing follows if it is welcome, and the person returns to their own freedom before God. Everything that follows in this work is an account of what that hour is.

The standpoint

The work is written from within the mystical, creation-centered stream of the Christian tradition. This stream reads creation as the first book of God and Scripture as the second, and it understands salvation as lifelong participation in the divine life. In its view, the human person was blessed before anything went wrong, and the deepest human illness is the illusion of separation from God, from one another, and from creation. It confesses Christ as the deepest nature of every person, fully embodied in Jesus and waiting to be recognized and raised in each of us. It reads the cross as the place where undivided love passed through every power of division and broke its hold. It holds as a conviction that God will be all in all. Among the saints of Ireland and Britain, standing within the whole church of East and West, it finds a particular witness to God's presence in everyday things. With the Fourth Gospel, it believes that the one Light that enlightens everyone (John 1:9) has never left any people without a witness.

None of this is a private position. Part Two sets out the standpoint at length and connects each of its convictions to the church's shared inheritance, which allows Christians of many traditions and people of other faiths to recognize the argument as theirs to weigh.

Method and limits

The argument is theological, historical, and pastoral. Its theology uses the church's own method, reasoning from Scripture, the teaching and practice of the churches, and the church's experience of grace. Its history examines what the sources show about how the cards began, how Christians have sought God through signs, and why the churches objected when they did. Its pastoral account asks what the practice does in the lives of those who receive it and holds it to the test Christ gave, its fruits (Matthew 7:16).

Three conventions govern the sources. The work reads the entire scriptural heritage of the early Jesus movement, canonical and noncanonical,

as a single witness, as the mystical tradition has always done. The Gospels of Thomas, Philip, Mary, and Truth, the Odes of Solomon, the Acts of Thomas, the Didache, and the Shepherd of Hermas are cited the same way as the books of the canon. Several of these writings were read in the churches of the first centuries, and the Shepherd is bound into one of the oldest complete Bibles still in existence. Theologians, scholars, and teachers are not named in the body of the work. Their contributions are paraphrased, and the notes and the Works Cited identify every source, so the argument can be followed on its own terms and checked in full. Councils, saints, and other figures who are part of the history are named where the history requires it. Finally, the work draws on its author's earlier theological work without citing it in the text; those writings are listed separately at the end.

The work is theological, and its discussion of civil law is brief. That discussion shows only that the law protects what the church already holds, and none of it constitutes legal advice. Its claims about grace are matters of faith, held as the church holds every claim about grace and offered to be judged by their fruits. Where it speaks of benefits, it draws modestly on the literature of religion, spirituality, and health, and it claims no more than that literature shows.

The plan of the work

Part One defines the terms the argument depends on, and Part Two sets out the standpoint. Part Three asks what a sacrament is in the Christian tradition, leading into the central claim of Part Four: that the tarot, rightly used, is a true sacrament and a useful sacramental, a means of grace of the same order as lectio divina, the blessing of water, and the anointing of the sick. The practice is then placed within the prophetic tradition of Scripture and the church (Part Five) and set apart at length from fortune-telling (Part Six). Part Seven takes up the history of the cards and the historic objections of the churches, and Part Eight the church's engagement with spiritual warfare. Benefits and uses come in Part Nine. Part Ten places the practice among the other religious traditions that keep sacred signs, Part Eleven argues for its protection as religious expression, and Part Twelve briefly answers the questions most often put to those who keep it. After the conclusion, appendices record the practice as it is kept, give a model rule and short rites and a glossary, and offer twenty-two meditations pairing each major image with a passage of the Gospel. The Works Cited, a list of related works by the author, and the notes close the work.

PART ONE
Terms

An argument about holy things depends on words that remain fixed. A number of the words in this work have loose or disputed senses in general usage, and four of them, divination, prophecy, prediction, and fortune-telling, are often treated as though they meant the same thing. They do not. The meanings set out here are maintained throughout the work.

Sacrament, sacramental, and means of grace

The Latin *sacramentum* originally meant a sacred pledge, such as the oath a soldier swore. Early Christian writers adopted the term to translate the Greek *mysterion*, a mystery hidden in God and then disclosed. The earliest Christian definitions describe a sacrament as the sacred sign of an invisible reality, and later theology condensed that teaching into the familiar formula: a visible sign of an invisible grace.[2] The scriptural heritage of the early church expresses the same point in its own idiom. Truth did not come into the world naked but came clothed in types and images (Gospel of Philip 67).[3]

This work uses *the term sacrament* in two registers that belong together, and it marks the difference wherever it matters. In the ecclesial register, the term names the principal rites a church recognizes as given by Christ and celebrates in its common life, such as baptism and the Eucharist. The number of these rites differs from one tradition to another. The mystical register is older and broader. There, a sacrament is any holy sign through which God gives grace to those who receive it in faith, so that Christ is the first sacrament, the church is sacramental, and the whole of creation is a sign of its Maker. Part Three traces both registers through the history of the church, and Part Four shows how the sacred table belongs to both.

A *sacramental* is a holy sign that a church sets apart by its prayer, to dispose the faithful to receive grace and to sanctify the occasions of life. Holy water, blessed oil and salt, candles, icons, the rosary and the prayer rope, ashes, palms, and the sign of the cross are sacramentals, as are blessings of homes, fields, boats, and animals. They work through the prayer of the church and the faith of those who use them.[4] A church institutes its sacramentals, and so a church may institute a new one. The whole argument rests on that definition.

A *means of grace* is any ordinance, rite, or practice through which God ordinarily gives grace to those who receive it in faith. The churches of the

Reformation used the phrase to refer to the Word and the sacraments. The Methodist tradition broadened it to include prayer, the searching of Scripture, fasting, and Christian conversation,[5] and that broader sense is used here, in which lectio divina, the blessing of water, the anointing of the sick, and the sacred table are all means of grace. Calling a practice a means of grace does not confine grace to it. It only says that God has been pleased to meet people there, and the church may rely on that meeting.

One last term in this family reaches past the bounds of Christianity. A *holy instrument* is any material object set apart for worship or prayer in any religious tradition: the chalice, the prayer rug, the shofar, the mala, the Torah scroll, the divining chain, and a blessed deck of cards, when each is kept for that use. *Sacramental* is a Christian category. *Holy instrument* lets the work speak of other traditions without forcing their holy things into Christian terms.

The practice and those who keep it

The sacred table is this work's name for the practice it defends, the use of the tarot in prayer at a blessed table, opened and closed in Christ, for discernment, examen, prophetic ministry, spiritual direction, and pastoral care. The name covers the deck, the place where it is used, the rite around its use, and the relationship of accompaniment within which it is offered. It also covers the same practice kept alone, in personal prayer and in the daily office.

A *minister* of the sacred table is a priest or another baptized person who keeps the practice within a rule of prayer and accountability. A *companion* is anyone who accompanies another in the practice, and the two roles often overlap. The work avoids the common commercial term for people who lay out cards for others because that term carries the very confusion with fortune-telling the work aims to clear away.

Much of the minister's work is *spiritual direction*, the long practice, within Christianity and beyond it, in which one person accompanies another in attending to God's presence and action in their life. The director decides nothing for the one directed. The director listens, asks, prays, and helps the other notice where God is moving. Many people today prefer *spiritual companionship*, which puts walking alongside ahead of authority, and this work uses both terms.

Pastoral care is the care of souls, the ministry of a church, carried out by its clergy and people, to those who suffer, seek, grieve, doubt, or stand at a threshold. It includes listening, prayer, counsel, blessing, anointing, prayer for freedom from whatever binds a person, and the practical help of a neighbor. Its

healing reaches into the depths where a person stands before God, and it works in partnership with medical and psychological care, welcoming both whenever they are required.

Where does such care do its work? Often in the region this work calls *psychospiritual*, where the psychological and the spiritual meet and cannot be fully separated: image, memory, emotion, meaning, conscience, and the sense of self before God. Much of what happens at the sacred table happens there. The word does not reduce the spiritual to the psychological. It names a place of encounter and affirms that grace works through the whole person.

The practice is kept by churches as well as by persons. An *autonomous sacramental communion* is a church that celebrates the sacraments, keeps orders in apostolic succession or in its own recognized line, and governs itself without being subject to a larger jurisdiction. It has its own canons, rites, and rules, and so it has the same authority every church has to order its worship and to institute sacramentals, an authority Part Three defends.

Prophecy, divination, and fortune-telling

Prophecy, which Part Five takes up at length, is speech God gives through a human messenger for the upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation of others (1 Corinthians 14:3). In Scripture it is chiefly forthtelling, God's word declared for the present situation. When it speaks of what may come it speaks conditionally, so that those who hear may turn (Jeremiah 18:7–10; Jonah 3:4–10). The Spirit gives it to the whole people of God (Joel 2:28; Acts 2:17–18), and the community always tests it (1 Corinthians 14:29; 1 Thessalonians 5:19–21).

Divination comes from the Latin *divinus*, of the divine, and in its root sense it means seeking the divine will through signs. Scripture records divination of this kind among the people of God, through the Urim and Thummim, the casting of lots, and dreams, and it forbids other practices that the same English word is used to translate. Part Six explores the difference. Common usage has narrowed the word toward prediction, so the work uses it sparingly and only in its root sense. Scholarship on divination across cultures has, for its part, come more and more to treat it as a way of knowing and of making meaning, and much less as a way of forecasting events.[6]

Discernment is the gift of perceiving what is of God in a situation, a decision, or a spirit, and what is not. Scripture counts the "discernment of spirits" among the gifts of the Spirit (1 Corinthians 12:10) and tells the church to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). It looks at

the present and at the paths that lead out of it, and it is the chief end the sacred table serves.

Fate, as the word is used here, is the belief that the course of a human life is fixed in advance, by the stars, by impersonal necessity, or by a decree no prayer or repentance can alter. *Providence* is the Christian conviction that God sustains and guides all things in love while human freedom and divine grace stay real. The Christian tradition has always rejected fate and affirmed providence, and Part Six shows that the churches agree on this whatever they think about divine foreknowledge.

Prediction is a claim to know what will happen. Ordinary forecasting, a weather report or a physician's prognosis, does no harm. In religious settings, though, prediction claims access to a future already fixed, one a person can learn about and then brace against or exploit. This work holds that no such fixed future exists for a human life, since every life stays open to grace and to response (Deuteronomy 30:19).

Fortune-telling, finally, is the claim to predict fixed future events in a person's life, usually for payment, apart from any prayer, rite, religious community, or accountable ethic. Its focus is the future, its promise is certainty, and its relationship to the person is commercial. Civil statutes on fortune-telling were written to address this practice, and this work rejects it as well. The sacred table differs on all three counts. Its focus is the present state of the soul and its path toward God. It offers wisdom, not certainty. And its relationship is pastoral. It is no more fortune-telling than confession, baptism, anointing with oil, or the Eucharist.

Grace, metanoia, and theosis

Three final terms name what the practice is for. *Grace* is God's own life, freely given, which comes before every human effort and makes every good effort possible. *Metanoia*, usually translated repentance, means a change of mind, a turning from the illusion of separation toward the truth that the human person was never apart from God, so that, in the words of an early Christian gospel, the kingdom spread out upon the earth may at last be seen (Gospel of Thomas 113). *Theosis* is the Eastern church's word for the goal of the Christian life, participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4), in which the human person becomes by grace what God is by nature. A practice oriented toward these three is oriented toward the purposes of every sacrament.

PART TWO
The standpoint

Every theological argument is made from somewhere. This one is made from within the mystical and creation-centered stream of the Christian tradition. This part describes that stream and shows that each of its convictions is shared by the broader church. It is less a branch than a root, running the length of the whole church, East and West. Naming it here lets Christians of many traditions and people of other faiths see the ground on which the argument stands.

Creation, the first book

The stream begins where Scripture begins, with a world God calls good (Genesis 1:31). Creation is God's first self-disclosure, the first book in which the divine is read, and it was never meant as a mask over God's face or merely a stage for the drama of salvation. "The heavens are telling the glory of God" (Psalm 19:1). The invisible things of God are understood through the things that are made (Romans 1:20), and the beasts, the birds, and the plants of the earth are teachers (Job 12:7–10). Several early Christian gospels that circulated outside the later canon say this quite plainly. The kingdom is within you and it is outside you (Gospel of Thomas 3). Split a piece of wood and the living One is there; lift a stone and he will be found (Gospel of Thomas 77). The Father's kingdom is spread out upon the earth, and people do not see it (Gospel of Thomas 113).

The church has long spoken of two books of revelation, Scripture and creation, each read with reverence and each interpreting the other. In the seventh century, the shining garments of Christ at the Transfiguration were read as these two revelations together, the words of Scripture and the visible forms of the world, both lit by the Word.[7] An Irish philosopher carried this reading into the West in the ninth century, teaching that creation and Scripture are both garments of the Word.[8] Some three centuries earlier, an Irish monk had told his brothers that whoever wishes to know the Creator should first come to understand the creature.[9] God still speaks in both books, and reading creation is a form of prayer.

The stream's way of seeing God and the world has a name: panentheism, from the Greek for "all in God." All things are in God, and God is in all things, yet God remains infinitely more than all things together. "Do I not fill heaven

and earth? says the LORD" (Jeremiah 23:24). There is "one God and Father of all, who is above all and through all and in all" (Ephesians 4:6). Pantheism says the world is God and nothing more. Panentheism says the world is held in God, filled with God, and never the whole of God. That one word keeps the Creator and the creature from being confused and from being put apart.[10]

Blessing and forgetting

Blessing precedes brokenness. Before anyone had done anything right or wrong, God looked on all that had been made and called it very good (Genesis 1:31). Humanity was made in the image of God (Genesis 1:26–27), an image that can be clouded but never erased. A theology that begins with the fall tends to meet the human person first as a problem to be solved. The creation-centered stream begins with the blessing and meets the person first as a child to be awakened.[11]

Seen from there, the deepest human illness is a kind of forgetting. A person comes to believe they are separate from God, from one another, and from the life of creation, and fear, grasping, and harm grow out of that belief. The early Christian Hymn of the Pearl tells it as a parable. A prince sent into a far country to recover a pearl forgets who he is and falls asleep among strangers, until a letter from his father wakes him with the memory of his origin and his robe of light (Acts of Thomas 108–113). In the canon the parable of the prodigal son tells the same story, and its last word belongs to a father who never stopped watching the road (Luke 15:11–32).

The Secret Book of John makes the same diagnosis in the language of the powers. What the rulers wrapped around the human being it calls "the fetter of forgetfulness," and yet Enlightened Insight, sent by God, was already hidden within the first human, renewing the mind from within (Secret Book of John 20–21).[12] Forgetting shows itself as ignorance of the wisdom that dwells within, as a falseness that lives from a self that is not one's own, and most of all as anxiety. Healing does not come as a strange song from a distant country. Christ comes to remind the soul of a song it has always known and has forgotten, the song at the core of its own being and of all being. The image of God in each person, however hidden, has never been destroyed.[13] Nor is the divine life limited to human beings. Every person, and in its own way every being, carries a spark of God, a flame lit by the One who made it. "Your immortal spirit is in all things" (Wisdom of Solomon 12:1). In God's hand "is the life of every living thing and the breath of every human being" (Job 12:10). And "the human spirit is the lamp of the LORD" (Proverbs 20:27). Forgetting

can bank that flame low. It cannot put it out. Part Four takes up how that spark answers when God speaks through images.

The cross and the powers

Within this stream the gospel is the good news that humanity was never finally separated from God. The separation people feel so sharply lives in a false sense of self, and it has never been in the heart of God. Jesus shows what God has always been like and what a fully awake human being looks like, and the whole of creation is being called home to remember. A threefold movement, then. The soul comes from God, it forgets, and it is called to remember, and repentance, *metanoia*, is the change of mind in which attention turns back toward a truth that was always true.

The cross sits at the center of all this, where God's solidarity with human suffering goes all the way down and no darkness is left without God in it. It shows who God is. It shows who the human person is. And in lived experience something truly breaks open there that no human effort could open.

Most of all, the stream reads the cross as an inversion of the powers. Scripture speaks of the rulers of this age, who did not understand what they were doing: "None of the rulers of this age understood this; for if they had, they would not have crucified the Lord of glory" (1 Corinthians 2:8). Several early Christian writings call these powers the archons.[14] They live off what splits a person against themselves and against God, on suffering that tears a person apart, on grief that never heals, on worship bent by fear. Christ went freely into the worst suffering they could inflict and carried it in his body with his love undivided, and powers that know only how to divide found nothing in him to feed on. Their tool of death became his road through their gates. He disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them (Colossians 2:15), went down to the spirits in prison (1 Peter 3:19), and made captivity itself a captive (Ephesians 4:8–9). The Word who descended was the Word through whom all things were made, and the Wisdom that delighted beside God at the creation went down with him (Proverbs 8:22–31; 1 Corinthians 1:24). Early Christian imagination told the descent as the shattering of the gates of the dead and the leading out of those held there.[15]

It is the church's older teaching. For most of the first millennium, the church taught that Christ, standing for all humanity, faced the powers that held humanity captive and set the captive free. Only in later centuries did the cross come to be read chiefly as a rescue from God's own wrath rather than from the bondage of evil.[16]

Nothing was paid to God, who did not need to be placated, and the Passion was never a means of satisfying God's own wrath. God was in Christ reconciling the world to himself, not counting trespasses (2 Corinthians 5:19), and God so loved the world that the Son was sent to save it, not to condemn it (John 3:16–17). Jesus came to change human minds about God. God's mind about humanity needed no changing. For the same reason, the cross can never be used to sanctify anyone's suffering: no one is required to reenact their own wounding, and love shaped by the cross may mean leaving a place of harm. The resurrection declares that forgetting does not get the last word. The life of the believer is hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:3), and the work of the Christian life is to bring to light what is already given.[17]

None of this runs contrary to the church's faith. It gathers up threads that run through Scripture and tradition: the father's house in the parable of the two sons, Paul's confession that in God we live and move and have our being (Acts 17:28), the prayer in John that all may be one (John 17:21), and the conviction of many of the church's teachers, early and late, that the love of God does not look around for what is lovable but creates what it loves.[18]

Participation

Salvation, in this tradition, means participating in divine life. The Second Letter of Peter speaks of becoming "participants of the divine nature" (2 Peter 1:4), and the Eastern church has made this the heart of its theology, calling it theosis: the Word became human so that human beings might, by grace, become what God is by nature.[19] The West expresses the same idea in its own language, through mystical accounts of union with God and a sacramental view of the world, in which created things share in God's life without ceasing to be creatures.[20] Christian mystics and alchemists had another, warmer name for it: a wedding. The soul is united with Holy Wisdom, and the sage speaks of her, "I loved her and sought her from my youth; I desired to take her for my bride" (Wisdom of Solomon 8:2). The Gospel of Philip lists this union as one of the mysteries and names it the bridal chamber.[21]

That is why material signs matter. If the created world participates in God, created things can become places of meeting with God, and a sacrament is a more concentrated form of what creation is always becoming, no outlier to the ordinary way things work. Every created thing can be understood as a thought of God given form, its reality found as much in the inner life that shapes it as in its outer appearance.[22] The stream calls this the sacramental character of the world. Parts Three and Four are built on it.

Christ, the deepest nature

Christ is confessed here in two registers that belong together. In the everyday register, Jesus of Nazareth was a poor Galilean Jew who ate with outcasts, touched the untouchable, healed and taught, and was executed by the empire that occupied his land. No account of the cosmic Christ is allowed to float free of that crucified man. In the unitive register, Christ names God's own presence in all things from the beginning: the Word through whom all things were made (John 1:3), in whom all things hold together (Colossians 1:17), the Divine making itself known. In Jesus, that life becomes fully personal and visible, divine and human without confusion or separation, and the truth about every creature is revealed in him. He became what we are so that we might become what he is.[23]

So Christ is not finally outside the human person. "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:27) names the deepest nature of every person, hidden and often forgotten, waiting to be recognized and raised to life. Paul labors until Christ is formed in his hearers (Galatians 4:19). He can say that it is no longer he who lives but Christ who lives in him, and still have a life to live and choices to make (Galatians 2:20). The Gospel of Thomas links the same recognition to knowledge of oneself: "When you know yourselves, then you will be known, and you will understand that you are children of the living Father" (Gospel of Thomas 3). Twentieth-century depth psychology arrived at a similar place by a different road, finding in the figure of Christ the fullest image of the whole self, the one of whom it can be said that he is in us and we in him.[24] These phrases name communion and indwelling, not the disappearance of the self. A person remains a creature who shares by grace in the life of God, and Christ dwells in them as their deepest nature while they continue to be themselves. That is how the Gospel of Philip can say of the one who has received the anointing, "You are no longer a Christian but Christ" (Gospel of Philip 67), and no one has vanished into God.

The mystical stream calls the first movement recognition and the second embodiment. In 1915, an American order of Christian mystics put both movements into one breath. Teach people, they wrote, to look for "the Spark of spiritual oneness in all things," because "religion is seeing the Divine back of all and manifesting it in the life."[25] The seeing is recognition, and the manifesting is embodiment. Recognition is waking to a union that has been there all along. Embodiment gives that love a human shape in a particular life, in the care one receives, the freedom one exercises, and the harm one repairs. The inner tradition has long read the Gospel story as the pattern of every life in

which Christ awakens: the Christ in each person is born, lives, suffers, rises, and ascends in that life, and the soul's unfolding follows the outline of the Gospel.[26] In the everyday register, the believer follows this man, listens to his words, feeds those he fed, and calls him Lord. In the unitive register, there is only Christ, and each person is a word of that Word.

Everything the work says about the sacred table flows from this confession. The table brings no distant God near and makes no union that was not already there. It helps a person see the Christ who is already their deepest nature, and then it sends them back to give that love a human life.

The insular saints

Among the early saints of Ireland and Britain, set within the whole church of East and West, the stream finds a particular witness to God's presence in ordinary things. Their prayers bind the one who prays to the strength of heaven, the light of the sun, the radiance of the moon, the swiftness of the wind, the depth of the sea, and the firmness of the rock, all held in Christ before and behind, above and below.[27] Blessings gathered later in the Highlands and islands of Scotland hallow the kindling of the morning fire, the milking, the weaving, the journey, and the banking of the hearth at night.[28] Nothing in that world was too small to bless, because nothing was outside the reach of God. The same tradition remembered the beloved disciple who leaned against Jesus at the supper (John 13:23–25) as the one who heard the heartbeat of God, and it taught that the heartbeat can be listened for at the heart of all creation.[29] Its holy places came to be called thin places, where only a tissue separates the material from the spiritual. When the Iona Community, founded in 1938 by a Church of Scotland minister, rebuilt the abbey's monastic buildings in the twentieth century, it showed that this witness still lives within the churches.[30]

These saints also kept a ministry of accompaniment, the soul friend or anamchara. A saying attributed to Brigid holds that anyone without a soul friend is like a body without a head. Columba of Iona was remembered by his biographer for prophetic sight, discernment of spirits, and visions of angels.[31] The prophetic, the pastoral, and the sacramental were one life for them, a life of prayer lived close to the earth.

Inner and outer, truth and fact

As the stream uses it, the word esoteric means inner, not secret. A secret is something one person keeps from another by choice. What the inner tradition

guards is an arcanum, something that has to be known inwardly before the spiritual life can bear fruit. It is withheld from no one and waits only for a heart that is poor in spirit (Matthew 5:3). Its images conceal and reveal at once, According to the depth of prayer brought to them, the only barrier the tradition names is self-satisfaction, never rank or initiation.[32] Jesus told his disciples that to them had been given the mystery of the kingdom (Mark 4:11). Paul spoke of a wisdom imparted among the mature, hidden and now revealed (1 Corinthians 2:6–7), and named its content plainly: "Christ in you, the hope of glory" (Colossians 1:26–27). The Gospel of Thomas opens with the promise that whoever finds the interpretation of these sayings will not taste death (Gospel of Thomas 1). From the desert mothers and fathers through the medieval contemplatives to the modern renewal of contemplative prayer, the church's inner tradition has taught that the faith has a depth beneath its forms, open to every baptized person who looks for it.[33]

In the modern period, historians of religion have shown that this inner stream came to be treated as rejected knowledge, sidelined in both the churches and the academy, though it had shaped Christian thought for centuries.[34] It asks for no place above the outer forms of the church. The forms are how the depth is reached, and the depth is why the forms matter. A sacred practice that uses forms to go beyond forms belongs here.

Truth, too, is spoken in two registers, and the stream will not merge them into one. In the everyday register, human beings are particular persons with bodies and histories. Harm is real, choices count, sin and grace are real, and God is addressed as a Thou. In the unitive register, nothing has ever been apart from God, and the separation that feels so sharp is not the deepest truth about anyone. The unitive is the ground; the everyday is the road the soul travels on it. Scripture keeps both: "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28), and also "work out your own salvation with fear and trembling" (Philippians 2:12).Hope has the same two registers. In the everyday one judgment is real, truth is told, and harm is named. In the unitive one all is held in love, and the stream holds as a conviction that God will in the end reconcile all things and be all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28; Colossians 1:20). An early teacher of Alexandria put the hope in a single principle: the end is always like the beginning, and the restoration of all things returns creation to the goodness it came from (Acts 3:21).[35]

Alongside this runs the distinction between truth and fact. A parable can be true without being a report. The prodigal son has no name or address, yet the whole world has recognized itself in his family. The inner tradition reads Scripture the same way, with an outer form and an inner life, an outer symbol

and an inner truth, both given by God.[36] Reading this way takes nothing from the material, sacramental, and historical elements of the faith in favor of a purely spiritual religion. It finds their meaning in the eternal truths they carry.[37] Symbols and stories can carry truth no list of facts could hold, and the deepest truths of the faith are received that way.[38] Without this distinction, it is hard to see how a blessed image can bear a true word without claiming to report a future fact.

One light, many windows

The stream is centered on Christ, not on Christianity as an institution. Christ is the true light that enlightens everyone (John 1:9), so that light is to be expected wherever people seek God sincerely. The divine spark in every human being is that same light, dimmer in some and brighter in others, and never absent. Paul told the people of Lystra that God has never left any people without a witness (Acts 14:17), and at Athens he began his address by citing an inscription on one of their altars (Acts 17:22–23). Early Christian apologists taught that seeds of the Word are sown among every people, and that whatever has been rightly said anywhere belongs to Christians as well.[39] The modern churches have said in their own documents that they reject nothing true and holy in other religions.[40] One Light shines through many windows. That makes neither all windows the same nor Christ just one window among many. The Light shining through every window is the Light that took flesh in Christ.

Standing here, a deck of blessed images laid out in prayer raises no new question. It raises the oldest question of sacramental theology, whether God, who made matter and, in Christ, became matter, may meet a person through it. The stream has always answered yes and has said that the meeting is judged by its fruits. The same ground shows why the practice is prophetic rather than predictive, since the God of the two books speaks in the present tense and calls for turning. It shows why the practice belongs to spiritual warfare, since the great battle of the soul is against forgetting that leads people to believe they are separate and alone. And it shows why the practice deserves respect beyond the Christian community, since the one Light has never lacked its witnesses. It also lets the wider church hear the argument in its own language. A Catholic will find the sacramental imagination and the theology of sacramentals; an Orthodox Christian, theosis and the mysteries; Lutheran and Reformed Christians, the Word joined to the sign; Anglicans, the outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace; and Pentecostals, the prophetic gifts poured out on all flesh. People of other faiths will meet a tradition that honors

their own sacred signs. What follows is written so that each of them can find their own footing beneath it.

PART THREE
What a sacrament is

Can the sacred table be called a sacrament? That depends on what a sacrament is and on who has the authority to name one. Four claims carry the answer. God gives grace through visible signs. The church has never agreed on a fixed number of sacraments. Creation as a whole is sacramental. And each church may institute sacramentals and order its own rites.

Grace through visible signs

From the first page of Scripture to the last, God meets people through things that can be seen and touched. The rainbow is set in the clouds as the sign of a covenant (Genesis 9:12–13). Blood on the doorposts marks the households that are passed over (Exodus 12:13). The tabernacle, the ark, the bread of the presence, the oil of anointing, and the vestments of the priests are made by human hands at God's command, and God meets the people through them. In the wilderness Moses is told to make a bronze serpent and set it on a pole, and those who look at it live (Numbers 21:8–9). It is a crafted image, used at God's word, and healing comes through it. In time the people began burning incense to it as though it were a god, and Hezekiah broke it in pieces (2 Kings 18:4). The same object was a means of grace in one use and an idol in another, a lesson Part Six returns to.

In the incarnation the pattern is fulfilled. The Word became flesh (John 1:14). Christ is "the image of the invisible God" (Colossians 1:15), and the Greek word for image, *eikon*, is the root of our word icon. Modern sacramental theology calls Christ the primordial sacrament, the meeting point of God and humanity, and calls the church the sacrament of Christ in the world.[41] Jesus' own ministry is full of matter. He heals with clay made from his own saliva (John 9:6–7), with the touch of his garment (Matthew 9:20–22), and through oil carried by his disciples (Mark 6:13), and he gives the church water, bread, and wine as signs of his presence. The apostles carry on the work. The sick are laid where Peter's shadow will fall on them (Acts 5:15), cloths that had touched Paul are taken to the sick (Acts 19:11–12), and the elders are told to anoint the sick with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14). One line in the scriptural heritage of the early church puts it best: truth did not come into the world naked, but came in types and images (Gospel of Philip 67).

When the church fought over icons, it worked out a theology of images that states the principle precisely. The faithful do not venerate matter as such. They venerate the Maker of matter, who became matter for humanity's sake, made his dwelling in matter, and worked out salvation through matter, and to despise matter is to despise the means God chose.[42] No sign is itself the source of grace. God is the source, and faith receives what God gives. But God does not scorn the material, having made it and, in Christ, taken it on.

The familiar Anglican formula holds two things together, and the argument needs both. A sacrament is an acted picture, a truth shown through material things and gestures so that those who could not take it in through words alone can see it plainly. It is also a real point of contact, a bridge by which grace passes from the unseen into the seen. The formula's own closing words call the sign "a means whereby we receive the same, and a pledge to assure us thereof," and that rules out any view of a sacrament as a bare reminder.[43] Images laid out in prayer answer to both halves. They are pictures, and in the prayer of the church they become a place where grace is received.

Some object that true worship is "in spirit and truth" (John 4:24) and that attention to material things distracts from God. The witness of the Gospels runs the other way. The Christ who spoke of worship in spirit and truth also made clay with his own saliva and gave bread and wine to his friends. Worship in spirit asks that matter point beyond itself to God and never take God's place; it has never asked that matter be left out. Even the Reformation traditions most wary of idolatry kept baptism and the Lord's Supper, because Scripture plainly commands them. Scripture forbids putting a created thing in the place of God. It commends receiving God through created things.

No fixed number

The earliest Christians did not stop counting the mysteries at two or at seven. "The lord did everything through mystery," the Gospel of Philip says, and it names five: "baptism and a chrism and a eucharist and a redemption and a bridal chamber" (Gospel of Philip 67) [44] For more than a thousand years, the church used the word sacrament broadly and without counting. The great Latin theologian of the fifth century applied it to baptism and the Eucharist, to many other rites and holy signs, and even to the blessed salt given to those preparing for baptism, which a council at Carthage in 397 called "the sacrament of salt."[45] Around the year 500, a Syrian writer described six holy mysteries, including monastic consecration and the rites for the dead. [46] In twelfth-century Paris, a theologian treated the sprinkling of holy water, the

reception of ashes, the blessing of palms, and even kneeling in prayer as sacraments that serve the sanctification of the faithful. [47]

Seven first appears as a fixed list in the 1150s.[48] The Latin church affirmed it at the Second Council of Lyon in 1274 and at the Council of Florence in 1439. In 1547, the Council of Trent anathematized anyone who taught that there were more or fewer.[49] That is a venerable tradition, and it deserves respect. It is also the ordering of one tradition, reached in one part of the church more than a thousand years after Pentecost.

Other churches of apostolic origin count differently. The Orthodox commonly speak of seven mysteries, a number that entered general use only in the later Middle Ages. Their theologians note that no ecumenical council has fixed the number and that earlier Eastern lists included monastic profession and the rite of burial.[50] The Church of the East, whose apostolic line runs through Persia and India, counted among its seven sacraments the holy leaven, a portion of the eucharistic bread handed down from generation to generation, and the sign of the cross itself.[51] Lutherans count baptism and the Lord's Supper as sacraments in the strict sense, call absolution a sacrament as well, and are willing to call ordination one if it is understood as the ministry of the Word.[52] The Anglican articles separate two sacraments ordained by Christ in the Gospel from five "commonly called Sacraments."[53] For the Reformed confessions, there are two, holy signs and seals of the covenant of grace.[54] Many Baptist, Anabaptist, and Pentecostal churches speak of ordinances, and several keep the washing of feet (John 13:14–15). The Religious Society of Friends keeps no outward sacraments at all and asks that the whole of life be lived sacramentally.

These churches disagree about the very word in question, and each claims, with reason, to be faithful to Christ. What they share matters more. Each holds that God gives grace through signs, each orders those signs by its own reading of Scripture and tradition, and none has authority to impose its count on the rest. Even the church that fixed the number at seven teaches that God has bound salvation to the sacrament of baptism but is not himself bound by the sacraments.[55] A God not bound by the sacraments is not bound by their number either.

Creation as sacrament

Part Two presented the mystical, creation-centered stream, which reads creation as God's first book, and sacramental theology takes the next step. If the invisible things of God are perceived through the things that are made

(Romans 1:20), creation is the first sacrament in the mystical register, a visible sign through which God's own life is shown and given. The Eastern church has described the world as made to be the matter of one all-embracing Eucharist, with humanity as its priest, receiving the world from God and offering it back in thanksgiving.[56] Contemporary theology has called for the recovery of this wider sacramental imagination, in which God may be met through landscape, art, music, architecture, and every form of human making.[57]

The cards belong to this world. They are paper and ink, drawn from trees and earth, and their images depict human life: a traveler at the edge of a precipice, a woman pouring water, a figure carrying a lantern through the dark, a pierced heart, a child riding in the sun. Made by human hands from the stuff of a sacramental creation, showing the road of the human soul and received in prayer, such images can also become places for meeting with God.

That is not pantheism, which holds that the world is God and God is nothing more than the world. It is panentheism as set out in Part Two: God is present in all things, and all things are in God, while God remains infinitely more than all things put together. Creator and creature remain distinct, yet nothing created is empty of God, since a spark of the divine life burns in every being. A sign is where God is met, and it is never mistaken for God.

The authority to institute

Christ gave his church authority to bind and to loose (Matthew 16:19; 18:18), and the apostles exercised it. When the first major question about practice divided the church, the apostles and elders met in Jerusalem and issued their decision: "It has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us" (Acts 15:28). Paul told the churches to keep the traditions he had handed down (1 Corinthians 11:2) and to do all things decently and in order (1 Corinthians 14:40).

The history of sacramentals is the history of authority in use. The blessing of throats on the feast of St. Blaise, the rush cross of St. Brigid's Day, the new fire of the Easter Vigil, the Rogation processions, and the blessing of boats, homes, and animals all began in particular places and times and were adopted because they nourished the faith of the people. Pentecostal churches pray over cloths and send them to the sick, following Acts 19:12, and wait for no council to authorize them. The Reformation churches wrote this principle into their confessions: every particular church has authority to ordain, change, and abolish ceremonies and rites of human institution, so long as all is done to edification and the true unity of the church does not require such rites to be alike everywhere.[58] The Roman church teaches that the church institutes

sacramentals and has provided for new ones to be added as the need for them becomes apparent.[59] East, West, and the Reformation agree that a church may institute a sacramental.

The closest model for the sacred table is the icon. In the eighth century, the Byzantine church was torn over whether images of Christ and the saints could be made and honored, and in 787 the Second Council of Nicaea ruled that they could. It distinguished the honor given to an image from the worship due to God alone and declared that the honor paid to an image passes to the one it represents.[60] An icon is wood and paint and does not contain the saint. It is a window through which the one who prays looks toward the one shown and, in the faith of the church, through which grace looks back. The tarot is a set of images of the human road toward God, painted in a Christian world from its virtues, its saints, and its Last Things, as Part Seven shows. Blessed and used in prayer, the cards stand toward grace as the icon does.

That authority is not reserved to the largest churches. It belongs to every church, and within every church to its ordained ministry and to the whole people of God, who together are "a royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9). An autonomous sacramental communion has the same authority as any other church to order its worship and to bless the means of grace it uses, and such communions do exactly this today. One, standing in the Celtic tradition, publishes its catechism under its own bishop's approval and teaches the sacraments as encounters with the divine.[61] Another's prayer book, compiled within the last decade, includes a rite to bless a rosary and a short form to bless any devotional article "and the one who uses it."[62] Blessing objects set apart for prayer is already part of the church's ordinary practice. A priest of such a communion, acting within its rule, may bless a deck of cards for prayer just as a priest of any other church may bless a rosary, a candle, or a home.

Two objections usually come up here. One says that only Christ institutes a sacrament. Many churches teach this of the principal sacraments in the ecclesial register, and their right to teach it is not in dispute. A sacramental, though, is instituted by the church by its very nature, and in the mystical register Christ instituted the whole sacramental life of the church by taking flesh, giving the Spirit, and sending the church out with authority. The other says that only Rome may define what is sacred. Rome is one great tradition within the universal church. It is not the arbiter for the Orthodox, the Oriental Orthodox, the Church of the East, the Anglican and Lutheran communions, the Reformed and free churches, or the autonomous sacramental communions, each of which has ordered its own worship for centuries. The

church is catholic in the old sense of the word, according to the whole, and no part of the whole defines the rest.

PART FOUR
True sacrament and useful sacramental

Here the argument reaches its center. Blessed and received into prayer, the tarot is both a true sacrament and a useful sacramental. It belongs to the same order of grace as lectio divina, the blessing of water, and the anointing of the sick, and it works with real power in the spirit and the psyche. The practice is neither entertainment nor fortune-telling, any more than confession, baptism, anointing with oil, or the Eucharist is. It is a means by which God meets people.

One holy thing in two registers

Part One set out the two registers of the word sacrament: the ecclesial, which names the principal ordered rites of a church, and the older, wider mystical register, in which any holy sign through which God gives grace is a sacrament. The sacred table belongs to both registers, in two different respects. Its matter and its ordered rite make it a sacrament. The encounter that occurs within that rite is a sacrament.

The church already holds holy things that work both ways. Consider the book of the Gospels. In the Eastern liturgy, it is carried in procession, kissed, and enthroned on the altar. In many Western churches, it is censed and held aloft, a sacramental object in every sense.[63] But when the Gospel is proclaimed, more than an object is present. The Reformed confessions say plainly that the preaching of the word of God is the word of God, and the Lutheran and Anglican traditions speak of the Word proclaimed as a means of grace in its own right.[64] The book is a sacramental, and the proclamation is an event of grace. So, too, an icon is a blessed object, kept and honored, and a window through which the one depicted is met in prayer. And the Moravian Daily Watchwords, verses of Scripture drawn by lot each year and read by millions every morning, are a printed book set apart for devotion and, for those who pray them, a daily word received from God.[65]

The sacred table is part of this family. The blessed deck, the table, the candle, and the rite that orders their use are sacramentals. The meeting with God that can occur when the word is joined to the image in prayer is a sacrament in the mystical register. They belong together the way the Gospel book belongs with the Gospel proclaimed.

The marks of a sacramental

A sacramental is a holy sign that a church sets apart through its prayer to dispose the faithful to receive grace and to sanctify the occasions of life. Across the traditions surveyed in Part Three, the churches recognize such signs by a consistent set of marks, and the sacred table bears them all.

To begin with, it is a matter. The tarot is a deck of seventy-eight images. Twenty-two trumps trace the soul's road from innocence through love, virtue, trial, death, and judgment to the world made whole, and fifty-six cards in four suits depict the ordinary stuff of a life. Some Christian keepers of the cards see the Ark of the Covenant in those four suits. The Letter to the Hebrews recalls what the Ark held: a golden urn with the manna, Aaron's rod that budded, and the tablets of the covenant (Hebrews 9:4). Rod and wands, tablets and swords, urn and cups, manna and coins. And the Ark was the place where God said, "There I will meet with you" (Exodus 25:22). Seen like that, a blessed deck is a small and humble ark. It is carried into kitchens and hospital rooms, and the same God may be met there.[66] The church has always prayed with images, painted, carved, woven, set in glass, and printed, and the cards are one more medium in that long line. That their material is ordinary is no objection. So are water, oil, wax, wood, and pigment.

Before it is used, the deck is blessed. "Everything created by God is good," the Pastoral Epistles say, and nothing is to be rejected if it is received with thanksgiving, "for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4–5). The church's oldest sacramental rule says the same: the word is joined to the element, and it becomes a sacrament.[67] The blessing of a deck brings together the signs every church uses for such blessings, including a lit candle, the reading of Scripture, water, the sign of the cross in the name of the Trinity, and prayer that the images may serve truth, love, and healing. From then on, the deck is kept for prayer and for nothing else.

Every use happens within prayer. Each session begins and ends in Christ. The minister grounds it in Christ's presence, calls on the Holy Spirit, and tests what comes in Christ's name (1 John 4:1). At the end come thanksgiving, blessing, and the return of the person to their own freedom before God. The cards can also be kept in a daily office, with a single card at morning and evening set within psalm and prayer. They are never consulted apart from prayer.

What the table is for is grace. It serves metanoia, the change of mind in which a person turns from the illusion of separation toward the truth of union with God. It serves the healing of grief, fear, and the wounds that block love. It

serves theosis, a human life transformed into the likeness of Christ (2 Corinthians 3:18), and it serves love of neighbor, since someone who sees their own heart clearly is freer to serve. Once a session turns to curiosity, advantage, or control over another person, it leaves these ends behind and stops being sacramental.

A sacramental also belongs to the life of a community and answers to its rule. The sacred table is governed by a written ethic of flourishing against which each session is examined, by a discipline of discernment that weighs every impression and refuses any hasty verdict, and by a rule of honest offering that forbids the sale of certainty or protection. Those who keep it live by a rule of life that includes accountability to a soul friend, supervisor, or confessor. Appendix B sets this governance down in canonical form.

Nothing at the table is commanded, and nothing is extracted. God is asked to speak, and those present wait to hear. The prayer at the center of every session is the one Christ taught, "your will be done" (Matthew 6:10), and where nothing is given, nothing is invented. The freedom of God and the freedom of the person are both kept.

Last, the fruits. Christ gave the church one test for every spiritual practice: "you will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). The fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23), and the church is told to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:21). When the table is rightly kept, people leave it consoled, more honest, braver, reconciled, and at peace. Three signs especially show that the good news has reached someone: they stop being afraid of God, they stop blaming those who suffer, and they set a place for the stranger. If fear, dependence, or exploitation show up instead, the practice has failed and has to be corrected.

Bearing all these marks, the sacred table is a sacramental on the same grounds on which the churches recognize holy water, the icon, the prayer rope, and the rosary.

The event of encounter

In the mystical register four things together make a sacrament: a visible sign, an invisible grace, that grace given by God and not produced by the sign, and its reception in faith. All four are present at the sacred table.

The sign is the blessed deck and the images laid out in prayer, presenting a human life back to itself in pictures. The word comes in three forms. There is the Scripture read when the session opens, the prayer of the minister and of the

one who seeks, and at times a word given in the Spirit for that person, a word of wisdom, knowledge, or prophecy, given "for upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:3; 12:8–10). When such a word is given, it is joined to the image in front of the person, and the two are received together. The grace is what the church has always meant by grace, God's own life freely given, and at the table it arrives as consolation in grief, conviction where there has been self-deception, courage in fear, light on the next stretch of a road, and the peace of being known and loved by God. The faith belongs to the person who comes and to the minister who keeps the table, joined to the prayer of the church.

Western theology learned to analyze a sacramental act by its matter, its form, its minister, and its intention,[68] and by that analysis the sacred table is an ordered act. Its matter is the blessed deck and the images laid out. Its form is the words of the rite: the invocation of the Trinity, the prayer for the Holy Spirit, the testing of what comes in Christ's name, the reading of Scripture, and the closing thanksgiving and blessing. Its minister is a priest, or a baptized person who keeps the practice within a rule of prayer and accountability under the communion in which they serve. And its intention is to do what the church does whenever it prays for someone: to seek God's word for that soul, for its healing, its turning toward God, and its growth in love.

That same theology separates rites whose grace comes through the act itself, rightly performed, from rites whose grace comes through the prayer of the church and the faith of those taking part.[69] The sacred table is of the second kind. No word, insight, or feeling is guaranteed. The church prays, and God, who is free, chooses to give. Grace given that way is fully grace, and in the mystical register the sign through which it comes is fully a sacrament.

The early church never imagined such a meeting happening in an empty room. Its teachers saw angels present and serving at every sacrament, beginning with baptism, as "spirits in the divine service, sent to serve for the sake of those who are to inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14), and one early vision shows the church as a tower built by angels upon the water of baptism (Shepherd of Hermas, Similitude 9). The meeting at the table takes place in that same company of heaven.[70]

One early text puts this with striking force. Truth did not come into the world naked, but in types and images. The world will not receive truth any other way, and it is necessary to be born again through the image (Gospel of Philip 67). Another early gospel speaks of the soul entering the kingdom when it makes the inner as the outer and puts an image in place of an image (Gospel of Thomas 22). The whole sacramental tradition shares their conviction. God

meets human beings through images because that is how human beings receive truth, and the transformation of the soul's images is part of salvation.

The spark and the image

Why would God speak through pictures at all? The stream's answer reaches back to Part Two. If a spark of divine life burns in every person, then the image of God is not merely something a person was made in. It is something carried deep within the psyche—and it answers when it encounters its own reflection. Scripture has always known this. "God speaks in one way, and in two, though people do not perceive it. In a dream, in a vision of the night, when deep sleep falls on mortals" (Job 33:14–15). "I the LORD make myself known to them in visions; I speak to them in dreams" (Numbers 12:6). Jacob lay down on a stone and saw a ladder (Genesis 28:12). Jesus taught through images, and "without a parable he told them nothing" (Matthew 13:34). Only Moses heard God "face to face, as one speaks to a friend" (Exodus 33:11). Almost no one else did. Everyone else heard God through dreams and visions, which needed interpretation; that is why a king troubled by a dream sent for Daniel (Daniel 2:36). One maker of a Christian mystic deck calls symbolism "the language God uses to speak with us." He does not pretend it is easy, either. Telling the guidance of Wisdom from the stirrings of one's own psyche takes a great deal of discernment, he says, and a person may never be certain.[71] The Gospel of Philip says Christ himself spoke this way: "He revealed who he is through types and images," and "image must rise again through image" (Gospel of Philip 67). And the Spirit poured out at Pentecost came with the promise that the young would see visions and the old would dream dreams (Acts 2:17). Scripture never treats the picture-making depths of the human person as a rival to the word. They are one of the places the word lands.

The church's mystics gave that depth a name. A Dominican preacher of the Rhineland spoke of a spark in the soul, a light so near to God that nothing created can touch it, where God and the soul come together.[72] Around the year 500, a Syrian writer taught that heavenly things are fittingly shown even through unlike and earthy symbols, since a homely image keeps no one from mistaking the picture for God.[73] And the twentieth-century Catholic meditation on the trumps carries that seeing straight to the cards. Every being, it says, carries "a 'spark' of God." For the one who prays with symbols, "the entire world, in so far as it is a series of symbols, does not hide, but reveals the Word," and the symbols themselves are no instruments to master. They are "ferments" or "enzymes" that stir the spiritual life, so long as the one who

receives them is poor in spirit.[74] The same book calls the arcana "more than symbols and even more than spiritual exercises," naming them "active initiating archetypes."[75]

The psychologist who did most in the twentieth century to restore the symbolic life arrived at the same ground from another direction. He noted that he took the word archetype from the church's own vocabulary. It first appears in reference to the image of God in the human person, and an early Hermetic writing calls God himself "the archetypal light."[76] In one of his most searching essays, he reached for the old alchemists' picture of scintillae, sparks of the world-soul "identical with the spirit of God," scattered throughout creation, and asked whether the archetypes are those sparks, carrying a light of their own. His answer was that "numinosity entails luminosity." The alchemists he quoted were reading Wisdom of Solomon 1:7, which says that the spirit of the Lord has filled the world. [77] He held that human beings have, always and everywhere, developed a religious function, and that the modern world has forgotten "the age-old fact that God speaks chiefly through dreams and visions."[78] Late in life, he read the gift of the Spirit as "a continuing incarnation of God," the firstborn followed by "an ever-increasing number of younger brothers and sisters" (compare Romans 8:29) [79] The work does not take on his whole system, and it hears his language as a psychologist's language. On the point that matters here, he and the mystics agree. The images that rise from the human depth are not random noise. They are among the ways the holy reaches a person.

Put these together and the sacred table takes on a new aspect. The spark in the person and the light in the world are one light, the true light that enlightens everyone (John 1:9). When an image laid on the table stirs something old and true in a person, the work reads that as the spark recognizing itself: the image of God in the human depth answering to a picture of the human road, in the presence of the Spirit who fills the world. That is why a card can seem to know you. Paper and ink know nothing. The archetype the picture carries meets the image of God the person carries, and when a word comes, it comes in the language that depth already speaks.

None of this loosens discipline. Not every image that rises comes from God, and the archetypes cast shadows as well as light. The same psychology that honored them warned that they can take hold of someone who will not stay awake. So everything said in Part Eight holds. Images are tested by their fruits, weighed in community, held as true in the symbolic sense and never as reports of hidden fact, and set down when they have done their work. But where an image leads toward love, humility, and freedom, the stream does not

hesitate to name what has happened. God has spoken, as God always has, in pictures.

Lectio divina, holy water, and anointing

The sacred table is a means of grace of the same order as the practices the church already keeps and honors, and it works the way they do.

Lectio divina is the clearest kin. The church's classic account of prayerful reading names four movements, reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.[80] A text is received, pondered, answered in prayer, and rested in. At the sacred table the same four movements happen with an image in place of a text: the person looks, ponders what is seen, speaks to God about it, and rests in silence. No one has ever thought lectio divina a lesser thing because its matter is ink on a page. God speaks through the attended page, and the attended image is no different.

Then holy water. Water from any source becomes holy water through the church's prayer, and the faithful use it to remember their baptism, to bless their homes, and to ask God's protection. Its chemistry does not change. Its place in the life of prayer does. The blessed deck is set apart in exactly that way and used in exactly that spirit, to remember who one is before God and to ask for God's help.

And the anointing of the sick. Oil, a perfectly ordinary substance, is blessed and applied with prayer. For two thousand years, the church has carried God's healing to the sick through it (James 5:14–15). The church does not say the oil heals by its own virtue, nor does it guarantee any particular outcome. It offers the oil because God has promised to meet the sick in the prayer of faith. The sacred table is offered in that faith and with that humility.

The list could go on. The prayer rope and the rosary give the body something to hold while the soul prays. The Stations of the Cross and the mysteries of the rosary lead the one who prays through a sequence of images. In the devotional emblem books of the seventeenth century, Catholics and Protestants alike prayed with symbolic pictures set beside Scripture. And the church has long believed that God may give a word through the opened Gospel, a word not sought by choosing.[81] The sacred table brings the principles of all of these into one practice: a sequence of images, received without choosing, prayed with the imagination, ordered by an office, and tested by the discernment of spirits.

Recognition and embodiment

Part Two confessed Christ as the deepest nature of every person, fully embodied in Jesus and waiting to be recognized and raised in each life, and the purpose of the sacred table flows from that. Nothing has ever been finally apart from God (Acts 17:28), so the table cannot manufacture a union with God and does not try. What it can do is serve the two movements by which that union comes to be lived. Recognition is the moment, sometimes gentle and sometimes overwhelming, when a person sees that the love they were looking for has been holding them all along. Embodiment gives that love a human face in the life the person actually lives.

Think of two different experiences. Making peace with an estranged friend is one. Finding out that the friend never stopped loving us through all the years of estrangement is another, and it can change a life even though the love is older than the finding out. Recognition at the sacred table is like that, genuinely new as an experience and wholly dependent on a generosity that came first. The sacramental tradition has always held both. Baptism enacts a belonging already given, and the Eucharist gives the Christ who was already present.

Recognition begins something. The table is kept so that Christ may take form in the person (Galatians 4:19), in how they receive care, use their freedom, and answer for what they have done. So every session closes with a small act of embodiment, chosen by the person and modest enough to carry into ordinary life: a truthful conversation, some time to rest, a request for help, a prayer, the repair of an injury. An image has done its work when it can be laid aside and the person in front of the minister can be given the attention one would give to Christ (Matthew 25:40). A striking insight proves nothing. What matters is whether the person leaves with more freedom and more love, and whether that love takes form.

Where it helps

Every sacramental the church has received is useful in a particular way, and the sacred table is useful in that way. The church could exist without holy water, and no one is saved by holy water alone. Yet where blessings, anointing, lectio divina, and holy images are kept, many people have been reached by God through them, and a church that has them is better equipped for its work. Nobody is arguing that every church must keep them all. The question is whether a church that finds such a means fruitful may keep it, and whether its people may receive God where God is pleased to meet them.

A sixth-century pope defended the images in the churches of his day by saying that what writing gives to those who can read, a picture gives to those who cannot, since in it they see what they ought to follow.[82] The principle reaches well beyond literacy. Many people receive God most deeply through images, and argument leaves them cold. Some carry griefs or wounds they cannot put into words. Some have been hurt by religious language and cannot hear it, though they can look at a picture. And many stand outside the churches altogether. They would never walk into a sanctuary, but they will sit at a table where an image is laid down, and there they may meet the God who was already looking for them. Where the sacred table is kept, it can be the door through which grace actually reaches people like these.

The mystical stream sees a deeper reason the practice helps. Forms exist so that the soul can pass beyond them, and every sacrament is a door into a meeting larger than the door itself. Made of earth and spirit, human beings cannot ordinarily receive the unbounded except through something bounded. The blessed sign is the form through which a person lets themselves receive what grace has already offered. The grace is wholly God's gift, and the form is where the person becomes able to receive it. The image adds nothing to God. It makes room in the person for what God has always been giving.

No Christian has to receive it to be saved. The work's claim stands at full strength: a true sacrament with real spiritual power, useful to the church's ministry wherever it is kept, and a help to all who are drawn to it. No church is asked to adopt it. What is asked is freedom, so that a church, a minister, or a faithful person who finds it fruitful can keep it.

Power in the spirit and in the psyche

The sacred table has real spiritual power: it can change lives and hearts and bring the soul into communion with God. This power belongs to God and works through prayer. The Spirit keeps a living flame in every soul—the same divine fire that burns in its own way in every being, an ember the powers may dim but never extinguish. That flame is what makes it possible to receive any sacrament. What is offered in the sign falls on living ground.

Prayer that has become dry or abstract finds a concrete place to begin again. Someone sees a figure carrying a lantern through the dark and asks God what light is being given for the next few steps. Perhaps for the first time in years, they are praying from the real circumstances of their life. Images also serve the discernment of spirits, which the church has practiced since the desert by attending to movements of consolation and desolation in the heart. Images

bring these movements to the fore, where they can be seen. A person can notice what draws them toward love and what pulls them toward fear, and bring both to God.

Often, when shown an image of their own condition, a person sees what they had been trying to ignore. Like David before Nathan's parable (2 Samuel 12:1–7), they recognize themselves, opening the way to repentance and reconciliation and, if they wish, to confession and absolution. Over the years, a daily practice of prayer with images does its work more slowly. A person learns to see the whole world charged with God's presence, find the sacred in the ordinary, and recognize Christ in every face, until the kingdom spread out upon the earth becomes visible (Gospel of Thomas 113).

Most of all, the table is a place of meeting. Many who come to it say they felt, perhaps for the first time, that God was present and loving, neither distant nor angry. This experience of communion is the heart of every sacrament. An authentic experience of God feels like a new freedom to love. When people come away from a practice, sermon, or sacrament feeling smaller rather than larger, there is reason to ask whether it opened them to God at all.[83] The sacred table submits itself to that test.

The same power reaches the psychospiritual region, where image, memory, emotion, meaning, and conscience meet. Grace works through the human mind, not around it, and both the church's long experience and modern study recognize what happens there. Twentieth-century analytic psychology observed that the psyche speaks in images, that the deepest patterns of human life appear in symbolic form, and that entering into dialogue with an image through active imagination may bring integration and healing that argument alone cannot.[84] Christian contemplatives knew this well enough, under another name. Imaginative contemplation of Gospel scenes lies at the heart of one of the church's most influential schools of prayer.[85] The most searching Christian meditation on the twenty-two trumps offers them in the same spirit: as twenty-two spiritual exercises in the family of the Franciscan, Carmelite, Dominican, and Jesuit schools.[86] Students of the mystical traditions have described an imaginal realm, distinct from mere fantasy, where spiritual realities take on images so the heart can perceive them.[87] That is where the sacred table works. The same psychology suggested that the pictures of the tarot trumps descend, distantly, from the archetypes of transformation, and it called the symbolic process "an experience in images and of images."[88] A true symbol, it said, is the best possible expression of something not yet fully known, and a symbol stays alive only as long as it is pregnant with meaning.[89] So a card at the sacred table has no fixed meaning to look up. Its meaning is

born anew in prayer each time, in the life of the one who brings it to God. The discipline of the imagination asks for two things at once: that what rises in prayer before an image be taken with complete seriousness, and that it be known as true in the symbolic sense and not as a report of outward facts.[90] Here, at the table, the distinction between truth and fact from Part Two is put into practice.

No fixed meaning does not mean no meaning at all. The church learned long ago how to read a holy thing whose meaning cannot be used up, because that is how it reads Scripture. An Irish teacher of the ninth century said there are many ways, "indeed an infinite number," of interpreting the Scriptures, "just as in one and the same feather of a peacock and even in the same small portion of the feather, we see a marvelously beautiful variety of innumerable colors."[91] The early church of Ireland and Britain read its Bible three ways at once, a threefold cord not quickly broken (Ecclesiastes 4:12). It read with both feet on the ground, in the plain words and the real world they came from. It read for the symbol and the pattern, looking through the surface toward Christ, as Paul read the rock in the wilderness: "the rock was Christ" (1 Corinthians 10:4). And it read with imagination, letting the text start new prayer, new poems, new making. Nobody read alone. Monks read together, and one generation's notes in the margin answered the last. The desert teaching those monks loved handed down the same discipline of four senses, the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the heavenly.[92]

The cards are not Scripture, and nothing here makes them so. But the way the church reads its holiest text lends its discipline to reading lesser holy images. At the table, the grounded reading always comes first: what is actually in the picture and what is actually happening in the person's life. That keeps anyone, the minister least of all, from reading in whatever they wish. Then the symbol, what the image carries from the Christian world that painted it (the virtues, the passage through death, the four living creatures around the throne), read toward Christ. Then the imagination, the person's own prayer and response, which is why they speak first. The moral sense has its place in the small act of embodiment that ends each session, and the heavenly sense in the hope the images keep pointing toward, the world made whole. And the reading is always tested together. Many colors, one feather.

Images also help people make meaning. Those who have survived great suffering have said that human beings can endure almost anything if they can find meaning in it, and that the search for meaning is itself a primary human need.[93] A person in crisis often knows the facts of their situation without knowing what they mean, and an image can hold the facts together in a form

that lets meaning come. A clinical psychologist who studied the tarot in depth described the cards as reflecting a person's inner situation back to them, so they could see it, speak of it, and choose how to respond.[94] At the sacred table, the person always speaks first, and the minister offers reflections only as questions, so what emerges is the person's own truth before God.

Research on religion and health has found consistent links between religious and spiritual practice and many measures of well-being, including coping with illness, recovery from grief, and resilience in crisis. Clinicians have developed approaches to care that bring the spiritual dimension in.[95] That literature does not study the sacred table, and this work claims no more than it shows. What it does show is that practices of prayer and meaning-making carried out within a faith community are the kind of spiritual care that supports human flourishing, and the sacred table is one of those practices.

Psychology does not swallow the practice. Its psychospiritual effects are real and among the ordinary channels through which grace works in human life. The church has always held that grace perfects nature rather than destroying it.[96] A practice that heals memory, clarifies meaning, and frees a person to act in love is doing God's work. Describing some of its workings in psychological terms takes nothing from its holiness, any more than the chemistry of bread takes from the Eucharist.

Limits and objections

A claim this large needs clear limits to avoid overreach. The practice is not a religion or church of its own. The Christian inner tradition that has meditated most deeply on these images describes itself as a link joining mysticism, spiritual knowledge, and sacred action through the language of symbol within the life of the church.[97] No Christian is required to follow it for salvation; no one is less faithful for declining it, and no church is less faithful for not keeping it. Its grace comes through the prayer of the church and the faith of those present, as God wills. A session in which nothing is given but silence is received with thanks as well. The claim applies only to a deck that has been blessed, reserved for prayer, and used within the rite. A deck used for a game or for fortune-telling is not this sacrament, whatever its pictures. The minister claims no special power and is no seer, since the gifts belong to the Spirit, "who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:11). And the claim that grace is given at The table is a claim of spiritual truth, held in faith as the church holds every claim about grace and tested by its fruits.

Some say that calling this practice a sacrament cheapens the sacraments. The church's own history points the other way. When blessed salt was called a sacrament in the fifth century, baptism lost nothing, and when holy water and blessed ashes were counted among the sacraments in the twelfth, the Eucharist kept its place. The mystical register does not lower the principal sacraments. It raises the whole of life toward them, so the bread of the altar is seen as the heart of a world everywhere full of God.

Some say that only Christ can institute a sacrament. In the ecclesial register, many churches teach this of the principal sacraments, and their right to do so is not disputed here. In the mystical register, however, Christ instituted the whole sacramental life of the church when he took flesh, gave the Spirit, and sent the church out with authority (John 20:21–23). And the gifts at work at the sacred table, wisdom, knowledge, discernment, prophecy, and healing, are his own gifts, given when "he ascended on high" and "gave gifts to his people" (Ephesians 4:8, 11–12).

Others ask how a rite can be a sacrament without producing a specific effect. No sacrament guarantees a specific effect, and the church has never claimed otherwise. Even with the principal sacraments, the church teaches that the fruit received depends on the recipient's disposition.[98] Grace is God's free gift, and an open outcome marks a holy thing that is received, not possessed. Still others object that this is only psychology. But grace works through the whole person, and the fact that a practice's effects can be partly described in psychological terms does not show that the practice is merely psychological. Pressed consistently, the objection would reduce every sacrament, every prayer, and every conversion to a merely psychological event, and the church has never allowed that.

PART FIVE
The prophetic dimension

The sacred table is sacramental. It is also prophetic. That matters for everything that follows, because the character of biblical prophecy explains why the practice is not fortune-telling. In Scripture, prophecy is mostly a word from God for the present, spoken so that people may turn. When it speaks of what may come, it does so conditionally, and it has done its work when the threatened future never arrives. A practice shaped by that kind of prophecy cannot be a trade in predictions.

A gift to the whole people

Prophecy in Scripture is never the preserve of a professional class. Two elders once prophesied in the camp, outside the tent of meeting, and Joshua urged Moses to stop them. Moses replied, "Would that all the LORD's people were prophets, and that the LORD would put his spirit on them!" (Numbers 11:29). Joel announced that this wish would come true: "I will pour out my spirit on all flesh; your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men shall dream dreams, and your young men shall see visions" (Joel 2:28). At Pentecost, Peter told the crowd that this was what they were witnessing (Acts 2:16–18).

Women and men alike carry the gift. Miriam is called a prophet (Exodus 15:20), and Deborah judges Israel as one (Judges 4:4). When the book of the law is found in the temple, the king's officials consult Huldah (2 Kings 22:14–20). Anna, a prophet of great age, speaks of the child Jesus to everyone looking for the redemption of Jerusalem (Luke 2:36–38), and Philip the evangelist has four daughters who prophesy (Acts 21:9). In the Gospel of Mary, Mary Magdalene receives a vision and teaching from the risen Lord and passes them on to the disciples. Peter questions her. Levi rebukes him, and the disciples go out to preach (Gospel of Mary 10, 18). A prophetic word is given to a disciple, challenged within the community, and, in the end, received.

For the apostolic church, this was ordinary life. Paul urges the Corinthians to pursue love and strive for the spiritual gifts, "and especially that you may prophesy" (1 Corinthians 14:1). He tells the Thessalonians not to quench the Spirit or despise the words of prophets, but to test everything and hold fast to what is good (1 Thessalonians 5:19–21). Revelation unifies the whole tradition

in one sentence: "the testimony of Jesus is the spirit of prophecy" (Revelation 19:10).

What is it for? Paul answers plainly: "those who prophesy speak to other people for their upbuilding and encouragement and consolation" (1 Corinthians 14:3). Prophecy can also convict, exposing the secrets of the heart until a person falls down in worship and declares that God is truly present (1 Corinthians 14:24–25). Paul never says its purpose is to reveal a fixed future for its own sake. The great prophets of the Hebrew Scriptures speak mostly about the present: injustice toward the poor, idolatry, the covenant, and God's mercy. Amos denounces those who trample the needy (Amos 8:4–6). Micah declares what the Lord requires: to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God (Micah 6:8). Isaiah describes the fast God chooses: freeing people from injustice, sharing bread with the hungry, and welcoming the homeless poor into one's home (Isaiah 58:6–7). Theologians have long called this forthtelling rather than foretelling. Even when prophets speak about the future, they do so for the sake of the present, offering warnings and promises meant to prompt people to change course or take courage. And the future they describe depends on the response they receive.

Nineveh

Nothing in Scripture illustrates this more clearly than Jonah. He is sent to Nineveh with a message of judgment: "Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!" (Jonah 3:4). The people believe God, proclaim a fast, and turn from their evil ways—from the king on his throne to the animals in the fields. "When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it" (Jonah 3:10). The prophecy did not come true, and it succeeded completely. It was never meant to report a fixed event. It was meant to bring a city to turn from its evil so that the city could live. Jonah understood that all along, which is why he ran at the start and sulked at the end: "I knew that you are a gracious God and merciful, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent from punishing" (Jonah 4:2). A fortune-teller whose forecast fails has failed. A prophet whose warning is heeded has fulfilled the word of God. The whole difference between prophecy and fortune-telling lies there.

Scripture presents the same principle as a rule governing God's dealings with nations. In the potter's house, Jeremiah sees a vessel spoiled in the potter's hand and remade into another, and the Lord speaks to him. If God declares

that a nation will be plucked up and destroyed, but that nation turns from its evil, God will change his mind about the disaster. If God declares that a nation will be built up, but it does evil, God will change his mind about the good (Jeremiah 18:1–10). Ezekiel applies the same principle to each person: if the wicked turn from their sin and do what is right, they shall surely live, and none of their sins will be remembered against them (Ezekiel 33:14–16). Isaiah tells King Hezekiah that he will die. Hezekiah prays and weeps, and before Isaiah has crossed the middle court, the word changes and fifteen years are added to the king's life (2 Kings 20:1–6; Isaiah 38:1–5).

In practice, then, if not in these words, the prophets recognize three kinds of future. Is there a fated future, fixed in advance and beyond all change? They do not believe it exists. The probable future is what will arrive unless something changes, shaped by habits, injustices, and choices already in motion. The possible future opens when a person or a people hears the word of God and turns. The prophet names the probable so that the possible can be chosen.[99] Fortune-telling reads the probable future and sells it as fate. "What do you see?"The prophetic tradition is also a tradition of images. Again and again God shows a prophet something ordinary and asks what he sees. "Jeremiah, what do you see?" "A branch of an almond tree," Jeremiah answers, and God God tells him he is watching over his word to fulfill it (Jeremiah 1:11–12). God asks again, and Jeremiah sees a boiling pot tilted away from the north (Jeremiah 1:13–14). Amos is shown a plumb line set among the people (Amos 7:7–8) and a basket of summer fruit whose Hebrew name sounds like the word for an end (Amos 8:1–2). Jeremiah is sent to watch clay reworked at the potter's house (Jeremiah 18:1–6) and later to buy a field in a besieged land as a sign that fields and houses will be bought again (Jeremiah 32:6–15). Ezekiel acts out the siege of Jerusalem with a brick and an iron plate (Ezekiel 4:1–3). Zechariah sees horsemen, lampstands, and a flying scroll (Zechariah 1–6).

God takes an ordinary image, calls the prophet's attention to it, and gives a word through it. The image is not the word and has no power of its own, but the word comes through it, and the image carries the word to those who hear. At the sacred table, the question is the same. What do you see? The person looks at an image of ordinary life, says what they see, and in the silence of prayer a word may come through it. Here the sacred table stands squarely within the prophetic tradition of Israel.

Testing the word, then and since

The first Christians show how a prophetic word works in practice. At Antioch, the prophet Agabus foretold a severe famine, and the disciples sent relief to the believers in Judea (Acts 11:27–30). A word of hardship thus became an act of love. Years later, Agabus took Paul's belt, bound his own hands and feet with it, and said that the belt's owner would be bound in Jerusalem (Acts 21:10–11). The disciples begged Paul not to go. But Paul said he was ready to be bound and even to die for the name of the Lord Jesus, and he went (Acts 21:12–14). The word lit the road ahead but left Paul free to walk it. It informed his discernment; it decided nothing for him.

The same church tested every word. "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others weigh what is said" (1 Corinthians 14:29). "Do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1). The Didache offers a practical test: true and false prophets are known by their ways and by whether they live what they teach. Anyone who says in the Spirit, "Give me money," is not to be heeded (Didache 11). The fullest early account of this distinction appears in the Shepherd of Hermas, read in second-century churches and bound into one of the oldest complete Bibles. Its false prophet sits apart, consulted by the double-minded as though he were a soothsayer and asked about their future. Having no power from God, he answers according to their wishes and takes payment for his prophecy. By contrast, the Spirit from God needs no consultation. It speaks of itself when God wills, and anyone who has the divine Spirit is known by a humble, gentle, and righteous life (Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 11). Hermas names precisely the dangers the sacred table must avoid, and the table is built to avoid each one. It does not answer questions about the future on demand. Every question is brought to God in prayer; the table waits, and when nothing is given, nothing is invented. Nobody is told simply what they want to hear: the person speaks first, the minister offers reflections only as questions, and every word is tested in Christ's name. No word is sold. Any offering supports the minister's time and care, while the word itself, if one comes, belongs to God. Its ministers are known by their lives and answer to a rule and a community. Hermas also names the condition of those who went to the false prophet: double-minded, divided between trust in God and trust in a forecast. The sacred table is ordered to the single-hearted trust that the prayer "your will be done" (Matthew 6:10) puts into words.

The gift did not end with the apostles. The church in every age has known people through whom God spoke a word for their time, and the insular saints

are remembered that way. Columba's seventh-century biographer devoted an entire book to the saint's prophetic revelations, his knowledge of distant events, his discernment of the state of souls, and his words of warning and comfort to those who came to him.[100] Hildegard of Bingen wrote her visions into a great book of revelations in the twelfth century; according to accounts of her life, parts of it were read at the Synod of Trier in 1147–1148, and the pope encouraged her to write down what she saw.[101] Julian of Norwich received a series of showings in the fourteenth century and spent decades interpreting them, and their central word, that all shall be well, has consoled the church ever since.[102] In the modern period, the Pentecostal and charismatic movements have brought the prophetic gifts back into the ordinary worship of millions, with words of knowledge and prophecy offered to particular people and weighed by the community.

Each time, the church has held two things together. God speaks through particular persons and particular signs. Such words must be tested, must build up and console, must lead to love, and must never be sold. The sacred table stands within this tradition and accepts its discipline.

The word at the table

Biblical prophecy is never only private. The prophets spoke to kings and nations about how they treated the poor, the widow, the orphan, and the stranger, and Jesus began his ministry by reading from Isaiah that the Spirit of the Lord had anointed him to bring good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, and freedom to the oppressed (Luke 4:18–19). So a word at the sacred table may concern justice as much as consolation. It may call someone to make restitution, to seek reconciliation where that is safe, to look for safety and support in a relationship that harms them, or to give themselves to the care of others. That is one reason the practice is ordered to love of neighbor and not to private advantage.

The discipline the table maintains is the one Scripture and the church have taught. Its minister claims no special status as a seer. The gifts belong to the Spirit, "who allots to each one individually just as the Spirit chooses" (1 Corinthians 12:11), and are given for the good of the whole community (1 Corinthians 12:7). A word that seems to be given is offered modestly—as something the person may take up or set down, never as certainty. No word of doom is ever pronounced. If a word touches on what may come, it is offered as the prophets and wisdom writers did: a description of where a present path seems to lead, so the person can choose freely, never as the announcement of a

fixed event. Every word is tested in Christ's name and weighed by its fruits. The minister is accountable to a soul friend, supervisor, or confessor, so the gift is exercised within the community.

Three different things can be said at the table, and each carries a different weight. First is the person's own association—what they see and what it stirs in them—and it remains theirs. Second is the minister's pastoral question, which opens a door but claims no authority. Third, and rarer, is a word the minister believes the Spirit may give. When that happens, it is named as such, offered tentatively, and left with the person to test against Scripture, their own conscience, the counsel of others, and the plain facts of their life. It may remain unconfirmed, be revisited later, or be set aside; no one is worse off for setting it aside. A consequential decision is never made on such a word alone. It also calls for ordinary evidence and independent counsel.

Kept in this way, the table is the prophetic tradition of Scripture lived in its most ordinary and pastoral form. Through an image, God asks what the person sees. A word may come that builds up, encourages, and consoles, freeing the person to turn, choose, and act in love. The future remains open, because the God who relented over Nineveh is still gracious, merciful, slow to anger, abounding in steadfast love, and ready to relent.

PART SIX
Why the practice is not fortune-telling

The arguments in this work turn on one distinction. If the sacred table were fortune-telling in a more pious guise, the theology of Parts Three and Four could not sustain it; the prophetic tradition of Part Five would not include it; and the churches' cautions would be justified. It is not fortune-telling, and it never could be.

What fortune-telling is

Fortune-telling is first a social practice and only afterward a theory. Historically, it has been a trade—a service sold at a booth, in a parlor, by telephone, or online—in which a practitioner claims to tell a customer what will happen to them. Will a lover come back? Will money come? Will an enemy fall? When will someone die? Its product is an answer. The customer values it for its claimed accuracy, and the relationship ends when the transaction does. Civil statutes on fortune-telling were written to regulate this trade and, especially, to stop the frauds that have often accompanied it, in which vulnerable people are told they are cursed or in danger and then sold remedies. Beneath the trade is a claim about the future. Fortune-telling assumes that the events of a person's life are already settled—written in the stars, fixed by fate, or otherwise determined—and that a skilled practitioner can know them in advance. The customer learns what is coming so they can brace for it or take advantage of it. The claim is predictive, the promise is certainty, and the practice succeeds or fails according to whether its predictions come to pass. [103]

Set the sacred table beside this, and it differs at every point. It concerns the present condition of the soul and its path toward God, whereas fortune-telling looks to future events. Instead of certainty, it offers wisdom for living faithfully without it. It holds the future open between God and the person and sends the person back to their own freedom, while fortune-telling asks the customer to adjust to a fate. A transaction answers only to customer satisfaction. The table is a rite that begins and ends in prayer, and it answers to God, to a rule, and to a community. It is judged by its fruits—love, peace, repentance, courage, and freedom—never by the accuracy of a forecast. These are differences of kind, not of degree. A witness from outside the church drew the line in exactly the same place. The psychologist who did most in the twentieth century to restore the symbolic life to Western thought wrote a foreword to a classic book of

oracles, and in it he said that the book's whole method aims at self-knowledge. That method, he warned, is open to every kind of misuse, and is "therefore not for the frivolous-minded and immature." The book, he concluded, "offers neither facts nor power, but for lovers of self-knowledge, of wisdom," it seemed to be the right book.[104] Fortune-telling deals in facts about the future and power over it. The sacred table offers self-knowledge before God and, with it, the wisdom to live.

No fate to read

The most profound difference concerns the future, and here the sacred table stands on the common ground of the whole Christian tradition. The church has never believed in fate. Since its earliest centuries, it has rejected the idea that the stars or impersonal necessity predetermine a person's life. Its early teachers opposed fatalism precisely because fatalism rendered repentance and grace meaningless: if a life is already written, neither sin nor conversion can change it, and the gospel of freedom loses its meaning.[105] At its core, the church's quarrel with the astrology of late antiquity was a quarrel with fatalism. The Reformation revived this quarrel when one of the leading Reformers allowed that the heavens might affect physical things but insisted that the destiny of the soul depends on God's will alone.[106]In place of fate the church taught providence, the conviction that God sustains and guides all things in love while human freedom and divine grace remain real. Christian theologians have explained how providence and freedom fit together in different ways, and the differences are real. On the point that matters here, every major account agrees.

Throughout much of the Western tradition, the classical account holds that God knows all things in a single eternal present, so that God's knowing a free choice neither causes it nor makes it necessary. The choice remains free, and God sees it as it freely is.[107] There is no fate for a practitioner to read, only the free unfolding of human lives within the providence of God. God's eternal knowledge of them is not available to human beings as a forecast. The Eastern church speaks of synergy, the cooperation of divine grace and human freedom in the work of salvation. God does not save without human consent, and human beings cannot save themselves without God, so the future of a human life is shaped by that cooperation and is no script written in advance.[108]Even the Reformed tradition, which speaks most strongly of God's sovereign decree, has consistently opposed fortune-telling and fatalistic prediction, because God's decrees are hidden in God and are not given to human beings to read, except as far as God has revealed his will in Scripture.[109] "The secret things

belong to the LORD our God, but the revealed things belong to our children and to us forever, to observe all the words of this law" (Deuteronomy 29:29). The relational and process theologies of the modern period go further still. For them the future in its details is genuinely open even to God's knowledge; God acts in the world by persuasion and invitation, and every moment is a real occasion of response.[110] No fixed future exists to be known at all. Philosophers who defend the classical faith reach the same practical place by a different route. The free will defense holds that a world with creatures who are significantly free—able to choose good and able to choose evil—is better than a world without them, and that God cannot create such creatures and at the same time cause them to do only what is right.[111] Whatever God knows, free creatures make their own choices, and no fate lies behind them to be read.

The sacred table needs none of these disputed claims. Whether God knows the future in an eternal present, shapes it together with human freedom, keeps its details hidden in a sovereign decree, or brings it into being moment by moment, no Christian account holds that a fate awaits, ready for someone to read and sell. Each teaches that people are called to answer God now, and that their answer makes a difference. The sacred table rests on this shared conviction and needs nothing more. Prophecy says the same. Part Five showed that biblical prophecy speaks conditionally about the future: Nineveh was spared when it repented (Jonah 3:10); God relents when a nation turns (Jeremiah 18:7–10); the wicked who turn will surely live (Ezekiel 33:14–16); and Hezekiah's announced death was put off in answer to prayer (Isaiah 38:1–5). There is no fated future. A probable future will come if nothing changes, while a possible future opens when someone hears God's word and turns. Fortune-telling reads the probable future and presents it as fate. The sacred table, like the prophetic word, names the probable future only so that the possible one can be chosen; it never presents any future as fate. Scripture's own counsel about tomorrow governs the practice: "Come now, you who say, 'Today or tomorrow we will go to such and such a town and spend a year there, doing business and making money.' Yet you do not even know what tomorrow will bring... Instead you ought to say, 'If the Lord wishes, we will live and do this or that'" (James 4:13–15).

Christianity is not alone in this, which allows the argument to resonate well beyond the churches. The Jewish liturgy of the High Holy Days describes the books in which each person's fate is written at the New Year and sealed on the Day of Atonement, determining who shall live and who shall die. It then declares that repentance, prayer, and charity avert the severity of the decree.[112] Even a seemingly sealed decree remains open to change, and rabbinic tradition

holds that everything is foreseen, yet freedom of choice is given.[113] Islamic tradition holds God's decree together with the duty of prayer and right action. A saying preserved in the hadith collections teaches that nothing turns back the decree except supplication, and nothing lengthens life except righteousness.[114] Its prayer for guidance before decisions, istikhara, asks God for the good wherever it lies and for contentment with it; it does not ask God to reveal the future (Part Ten). Confucian tradition consults the Book of Changes as a discipline of moral cultivation—a way of aligning conduct with the way of Heaven—and its very title names a world in continuous transformation (Part Ten). The Buddhist teaching on karma describes consequences arising from actions and intentions, which change when those actions and intentions change; it is no doctrine of fixed fate.[115]

The mystical stream views the stars as it views the cards: as a mirror, never as a verdict. The lights in the sky were given for signs and seasons (Genesis 1:14), and the magi followed a star to the child (Matthew 2:2). Yet Scripture warns against those who study the heavens to control what is coming (Isaiah 47:13). The stars incline, as the old saying goes, but they do not compel. Across these traditions, the future is shaped by how human beings answer the holy. Prayer, repentance, and discernment exist because that answer matters. The sacred table belongs with them. Fortune-telling, with its future fixed and for sale, belongs to none of them.

What Scripture practices and what it forbids

Scripture does not condemn every seeking of God through signs. Some it records with approval, and some it forbids. The work is to see what separates them.

There are plenty of approved examples. The high priest carried the Urim and Thummim on his heart before the Lord continually (Exodus 28:30), and Israel's leaders sought God's decision through them (Numbers 27:21). Lots were cast over the two goats on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16:8), and the promised land was divided by lot before the Lord (Joshua 18:6–10). "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD's alone" (Proverbs 16:33). God spoke through dreams to Joseph in Egypt (Genesis 41), Daniel (Daniel 2), Joseph, Mary's husband (Matthew 1:20; 2:13), and Peter on a rooftop in Joppa (Acts 10:9–16). Gideon twice asked God for a sign using a fleece, and God gave it (Judges 6:36–40). The magi followed a star to Christ (Matthew 2:1–12). The apostles prayed and cast lots to choose Matthias (Acts 1:24–26). When Saul was rejected, the narrator notes that God would not answer him "by dreams, or

by Urim, or by prophets" (1 Samuel 28:6), showing that all three were recognized ways God answered. The fullest prohibition is in Deuteronomy: "No one shall be found among you who makes a son or daughter pass through fire, or who practices divination, or is a soothsayer, or an augur, or a sorcerer, or one who casts spells, or who consults ghosts or spirits, or who seeks oracles from the dead" (Deuteronomy 18:10–11). Its context determines its meaning. It is introduced as a description of "the abhorrent practices of those nations" (Deuteronomy 18:9). It begins with the sacrifice of children. And God's provision for the need it describes follows right after: "The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet" (Deuteronomy 18:15). The passage sets a whole religious economy of fear, in which the living bargained with dangerous powers and paid for their safety with their own children, against the living God who speaks to the people through the prophets. What matters is that Israel turns toward God, not away. Isaiah puts the concern in one question: "Should not a people consult their God?" (Isaiah 8:19).

The New Testament reads it the same way. In Philippi, Paul meets a slave girl with a spirit of divination whose owners earned a great deal of money from her fortune-telling. He frees her from the spirit in the name of Jesus, and her owners, seeing their profit gone, have Paul and Silas beaten and jailed (Acts 16:16–24). Three things Scripture consistently opposes meet in that story: a spirit not of God, a person held in bondage, and money made from her bondage.

An objector may press the point further. Deuteronomy limits both how Israel seeks guidance and whom it consults, and drawing a card at random looks more like a technique than a prayer. But these cases are not all the same. Casting lots to assign a role (Acts 1:26) differs from an unasked-for sign, a vision interpreted through Scripture, an image chosen for contemplation, or a card drawn in response to a question. A drawn card is closest to a lot, which Scripture both used and placed within bounds: "The lot is cast into the lap, but the decision is the LORD's alone" (Proverbs 16:33). The table treats a random draw as the Moravians treated a drawn verse: as an occasion for prayer and conversation, whose meaning is weighed, never obeyed. The draw decides nothing; the person decides before God.

Taken together, these texts establish the principle. Scripture forbids turning from God to other powers, as Saul did at Endor when God would not answer him and he sought an answer elsewhere (1 Samuel 28). It forbids a religious economy built on fear and bargaining, with child sacrifice as its extreme. It forbids profiting from people, as the slave girl's owners did. And

throughout the prophets' witness, it rejects any teaching that the future is fixed and a person cannot change course. Later church teachers drew the same distinctions. They warned against paid oracles, the fatalism of the astral religion of their time, and divided loyalty; they also recognized that God may give signs and that lots may be cast in genuine need, with reverence and prayer.[116]

Measured against each of these, the sacred table is on the side Scripture permits. It seeks counsel from no one but God, opens in Christ, calls on the Holy Spirit, tests every spirit in Christ's name, and closes with thanksgiving. It asks and listens, makes no demands, offers nothing in exchange for a good answer, and centers on the prayer "your will be done," which leaves no room for an economy of fear and bargaining. It exploits no one, since it sells no certainty, promises no outcome, and forbids using grief or fear for gain. And far from teaching a fixed In the future, it teaches the opposite and returns every person to their own freedom.

The other difficult passages in the Torah, including Exodus 22:18, are read in the same way. Taken within the full witness of Scripture, they forbid manipulation, control over others, and turning away from God. They do not condemn symbols, images, or prayerful actions in themselves; Scripture uses all three throughout. For this reason, the church's mystical tradition understands sacramental action broadly, including what some traditions call sacramental magic: intentional symbolic action offered in prayer. It does not coerce God, guarantee certainty, or impose on another person's will. The one who prays makes a request, while God remains free (Matthew 26:39). A twentieth-century Catholic meditation on the trumps describes sacred magic in precisely these terms: the person acting is an instrument of divine power, never its source. Its emblem is Mary's answer to the angel, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word" (Luke 1:38) [117] At the sacred table, this is the prayer "your will be done." Stones, herbs, candles, oil, and images used in this way serve as reminders for the soul's memory, not as idols. The boundary is not drawn around a deck of cards or any other object. It is crossed when someone gives up their conscience, tries to control another person, acts out of fear, or places dependence where communion belongs. The sacred table remains on the right side of that boundary, and it is this boundary —not the presence of any particular object—that the church is right to guard.

At the table

What happens in a session makes the distinction clear. Someone arrives, and the minister welcomes them and asks how they are doing—physically and emotionally. A candle is lit, followed by silence and a brief prayer, using words the person feels comfortable with, asking the Holy Spirit to guide their time together. Then the minister listens. The person is invited to share what they are carrying, and the minister hears their whole story before anything else happens. Many sessions continue this way to the end: a conversation in God's presence, with the cards never touched.

If the person wants to explore what they are carrying through an image, the minister draws one to three cards—or invites the person to draw them—and places them on the table. The person speaks first: What do they see in the image, and what does it stir in them? The minister offers reflections only as questions: What catches your eye in this figure? Where do you see yourself in it? What might God be inviting you to notice? Silence and prayer follow. If a word seems to be given, it is offered humbly, as something the person may take up or set down. Toward the end, the session takes stock by asking what stands out, what God's invitation might be, and what one step the person might take. That step is the session's act of embodiment: something small the person chooses, such as an honest conversation, rest, a request for help, a prayer, or repairing an injury. The session closes with thanksgiving, a blessing if welcome, and the person being sent back to their own freedom before God.

The focus is the present: the person's condition, questions, fears, hopes, and God's invitation now. The past enters only to be healed, and the future only as a range of paths the person is free to choose. The person interprets the image for themselves; the minister asks, prays, and accompanies them. The aim is discernment and meaning. Information about events has no place, and the person leaves more able—not less able—to choose. Nothing in the whole sequence resembles the sale of a forecast.

People bring questions about the future, as they do to every pastor and spiritual director. Will he come back? Will I get the job? Will my mother recover? Is this the right decision? How the table receives these questions is one of the clearest signs of its difference: they are received as prayers, never answered as forecasts. Behind each question lies something deeper—a fear, longing, grief, hope, or need for courage—and the minister helps the person identify it and offer it to God. "Will he come back?" may become "How do I live with this loss, and what is love asking of me now?" "Will I get the job?" may become "What do I fear, what do I hope, and how can I prepare faithfully

whatever happens?" Scripture makes this move again and again. When the disciples asked the risen Christ whether he would now restore the kingdom to Israel, he told them it was not for them to know the times or periods, and that they would receive power when the Holy Spirit came upon them (Acts 1:6–8). A question about the future became a promise for the present.

A reading describes the weather; it is not a verdict. Like a forecast, it speaks of conditions and tendencies. Like every prophetic word, it may change when people change (Jeremiah 18:7–10). When a session considers what may lie ahead, it speaks as wisdom literature does: it describes where a present course appears to lead, allowing the person to choose. Proverbs is replete with this kind of foresight. "The clever see danger and hide; but the simple go on, and suffer for it" (Proverbs 22:3). "The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps" (Proverbs 16:9). If a particular course continues, a particular outcome is likely, but another course remains possible. A reading at the sacred table is like viewing part of a map before a journey, while recognizing that the route one takes may change the map. The twentieth century gave a name to the experience of an inner state and an outer event answering one another, without either causing the other: meaningful coincidence.[118] The sacred table claims no more than this kind of meaning, received in prayer. The cards never cause, determine, or reveal a settled event. When someone presses for timing, the minister may offer an impression, and the wording will not suggest otherwise. It is a sense of how a present course is unfolding, held as a feeling and never as a date, offered so the person may consider it and set it aside; it settles nothing. It is never about death, never a pronouncement of doom, and never a claim to know another person's hidden heart or a concealed fact. The person is reminded that they remain free. Requests for a definitive yes or no about fixed outcomes go unanswered, and no one is ever given a date of death or subjected to a pronouncement of doom. Those who continue this practice find that this refusal is itself a form of ministry. Many who arrive seeking certainty discover, by the end, that what they needed was courage, consolation, and the reassurance that they are not alone. In the language of the spiritual life, anxiety is one of the masks of forgetting who one is, as discussed in Part Two. This is a spiritual interpretation, not a clinical one. Anxiety has many causes, and medical or psychological care may be necessary. Fortune-telling intensifies anxiety by offering ever more certainty, requiring the anxious customer to return repeatedly. The sacred table offers a different path: remembering, in prayer, who one is before God. "Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own" (Matthew 6:34).

The ethic and the law

That distinction is built into the ethic that governs the practice: a minister who follows it cannot practice fortune-telling.

Under this ethic, a minister may not claim to know a fixed future or present an impression as certain. No one may be told that they are cursed or in spiritual danger in order to extract money or influence. The minister offers no verdict either way—not that someone is spiritually oppressed, nor that nothing troubles them—and never advises anyone to discontinue medical or psychological treatment. The table is never used to frighten, flatter, or manipulate. Any fee is stated in advance and covers time, attention, and care—not an outcome, guarantee, or protection. It is reduced or waived for those who cannot afford it, and assistance in a crisis is always free. The person may end the session at any time or stop attending whenever they choose. Dependence is discouraged; someone who returns repeatedly with the same worry is helped to find rest in God rather than in the cards. The minister is accountable to a soul friend, supervisor, or confessor, as well as to the communion in which they serve. Each rule stands in opposition to what defines fortune-telling. The sale of certainty is expressly forbidden. So, too, are the old frauds that frighten people with tales of curses in order to sell them remedies. Dependence, from which fortune-telling profits, is discouraged; and where fortune-telling answers to no one, this ethic requires accountability. The earliest Christian teaching on prophecy drew the same distinctions, stating that a prophet who asks for money is false and that the false prophet answers questions on demand and accepts rewards (Didache 11; Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 11). The ethic of the sacred table applies that teaching to a ministry for our own day.

Civil law, for its part, has treated fortune-telling as the social and commercial enterprise it is. Statutes and ordinances have usually targeted claims to foretell future events for payment, and often the frauds that accompanied that trade. The sacred table falls outside that category on every count. It claims to foretell nothing. It sells only the minister's time and care, on the same basis as any minister of religion may be supported. And it is carried out as an act of worship within a worshipping community, under a rite, an ethic, and a rule. Part Eleven sets out what follows for its protection. For now, it is enough to say that a practice that does not do what fortune-telling does cannot rightly be regulated as though it did.

Kin to confession, baptism, anointing, and the Eucharist

The sacred table is neither entertainment nor fortune-telling, just as confession, baptism, anointing with oil, or the Eucharist is neither. The comparison is exact: it names the family to which the practice belongs.

Each of these four is a rite conducted in prayer and directed toward grace, forgiveness, new birth, healing, and communion. Each is administered by a minister acting under the authority of a church, received in faith, and evaluated by the fruit it bears in a person's life. None is presented as entertainment or sold as a commodity, and none claims to predict the future. No one in the confessional asks a priest what will happen to them in the coming year, and no one receiving anointing asks for a prognosis of their illness. They come to encounter God, to be forgiven, healed, and strengthened, and to depart with greater freedom than when they arrived.

So does the person at the sacred table. It, too, is a rite within prayer, ordered to grace, kept by a minister under a rule, received in faith, and judged by its fruits. To treat it as fortune-telling is the same kind of category mistake as treating confession as counseling for hire or the Eucharist as a meal for sale. Whatever power it has comes from the same God who meets people in every sacrament. But what about entertainment? Shops sell decks with the same images and use them for games, amusement, and fortune-telling. Bread and wine are sold in shops too, eaten at ordinary meals, and water and oil are used for washing and cooking. The church's prayer and the faith of those who receive them make the bread of the altar the Eucharist, the water of the font baptism, and the oil of anointing a means of healing. The blessed deck at the sacred table is no different. Other uses for similar objects have no bearing on the holy use.

Objections

Some argue that fortune-tellers use cards, and therefore the sacred table is tainted by association. Scripture offers numerous examples of an object or act being holy in one context and profane in another. The bronze serpent healed those who looked upon it, but later became an idol (Numbers 21:8–9; 2 Kings 18:4). Lots were used to select Matthias for apostolic ministry after prayer (Acts 1:24–26), while lots cast at the foot of the cross divided Christ's clothing among the soldiers (John 19:23–24). The tempter quoted Scripture in the wilderness (Matthew 4:6). The bread of the Lord's Supper may be eaten unworthily (1 Corinthians 11:27–29). In each case, the church concluded that

the use, the rite, and the heart determine the character of the act; there is no reason to treat cards as an exception.

Is all speech about the future fortune-telling? Then the prophets were fortune-tellers, and so was Agabus, and Proverbs is a book of fortunes, along with every physician's prognosis, every pastor's warning, and every parent's counsel. The objection confuses speaking about the future with claiming that the future is fixed and can be sold, and the sacred table makes no such claim.

People come to the table wanting predictions, it is said, and receiving them reinforces the wish. People also come to pastors wanting predictions, to doctors wanting certainty, and to God wanting their own will done. Every time, the pastoral answer is the same: meet people where they are and lead them toward what they truly need. The sacred table takes up the wish for prediction as a prayer and turns it into discernment, and its refusal to sell certainty is part of its ministry.

Finally, the churches' teaching documents reject all forms of divination. Part Seven takes this up more fully. Here it is enough to note that the most explicit of those documents rejects divination because it conceals a desire for power over time, over history, and over other people, and because it claims to unveil the future, and that the same passage grants that God can reveal the future to prophets and to the saints.[119] The sacred table renounces both things the document objects to. It seeks no power over time or over anyone, and it claims to unveil no future. On this it shares the teaching's concern and stands with it against fortune-telling.

PART SEVEN
History, and the historic objections

A practice seeking recognition should provide an honest account of its history, including the history of the arguments made against it. Presented honestly, that history reveals images with Christian roots, a longstanding Christian practice of seeking God through signs chosen without human intervention, and objections whose concerns are ultimately shared by the sacred table.

Where the images came from

Playing cards arrived in Europe in the 1370s, almost certainly from the Mamluk territories of Egypt and the Levant. The earliest decks featured four suits, which in Italy became cups, coins, swords, and batons. In the 1440s, the courts of northern Italy introduced a fifth series of picture cards. The earliest known records date to Florence in 1440 and the court of Ferrara in 1442. The oldest surviving decks were hand-painted for the Visconti and Sforza dukes of Milan in the decades that followed. These picture cards were called **trionfi** (triumphs), a term from which the English word *trump* derives.[120]

A triumph was a formal procession, and the Italian cities of that age were full of civic and religious processions. The most widely read poem of the period on the theme shows Love overcome by Chastity, Chastity by Death, Death by Fame, Fame by Time, and Time by Eternity, and the trump sequence has often, and with good reason, been compared to it.[121] In the trumps, likewise, each figure gives way to a greater one, until the last.

The figures come from the visual world of the late medieval church. The powers of Christendom are represented by the Emperor and Empress, the Pope, and a woman in religious habit, later called the Popess. Justice, Temperance, and Fortitude—the cardinal virtues—appear as they did on the walls and tombs of every Italian church of the time; one of the oldest Visconti decks also adds Faith, Hope, and Charity. Then come the turns of human life: Love; the Chariot, a triumph in miniature; the Wheel of Fortune, an image preachers had long used to show the rise and fall of the powerful;[122] the Old Man with his hourglass, later the Hermit with his lantern; the Hanged Man; and Death, who levels every estate. The last things bring the procession to a close: the Devil; the Tower, called in the old French pattern the House of God, struck by fire from heaven; the Star, the Moon, and the Sun; the Judgement, where an angel sounds the trumpet and the dead rise (1 Thessalonians 4:16);

and the World, a figure standing within a wreath, surrounded by the four living creatures of Ezekiel and Revelation (Ezekiel 1:10; Revelation 4:7), in the place where painters set Christ in majesty. Outside the procession stands the Fool. He began as the court fool, and Christians who pray with the images have long recognized in him the one who becomes a fool for Christ's sake (1 Corinthians 4:10).

Read in order, the trumps tell of a Christian pilgrimage, from the powers of this world through love, virtue, trial, and the turning of fortune to death, judgment, and the world made whole. Historians have traced the Christian and Neoplatonic patterns of ascent underlying the sequence.[123]

The cards were made first for a game, *tarocchi*, played across Europe for three hundred years. Their use for divination came much later, and clear evidence of it appears only in the eighteenth century. In 1781 a French scholar proposed that the cards preserved a lost book of the Egyptian priests, a theory historians have long since set aside. Soon afterward a Parisian practitioner designed the first deck made for divination, and in the nineteenth century French and English esoteric writers linked the trumps with the Hebrew alphabet and the Kabbalah. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in London in 1888, built on that link, and in 1909 two of its initiates published the deck now best known, one of them a Christian mystic who wrote at length on the Grail and on the inner life of the church.[124] That esoteric revival belongs to the cards' history, and it carried forward an earnest, if contested, search for the hidden wisdom of the West. It took over the images from a Christian world. It did not make them.

The twentieth century saw a deep recovery of the Christian reading of the cards. In the decade of the First World War, an American order of Christian mystics was already teaching the trumps as symbols of number and letter within a Christ-centered teaching, and it set a reading made in conscious rapport with one's own soul, under divine guidance, apart from fortune-telling that seeks other powers.[125] A scholar born in St. Petersburg who entered the Catholic Church wrote twenty-two letters in French, one for each trump, treating each card as a spiritual exercise and a door into the mysteries of the Christian faith. He accepted that the deck is medieval, with no trace of it before the end of the fourteenth century, and held that what lives in the cards was not inherited from Egypt but reborn.[126] Honest history took nothing from his meditations. They were published anonymously, as he wished, and one of the most prominent Catholic theologians of the century wrote an afterword commending them.[127] In recent decades, clergy and lay Christians in several traditions, priests of the Episcopal Church among them, have published guides

to praying with the images as a Christian path.[128] Christian at their origin, the images are being received again into Christian prayer.

Drawn without choosing

Seeking God's guidance through signs that come without human choice has a long Christian history and runs through the center of the church, not along its edges.

The apostles prayed and cast lots to choose Judas's successor (Acts 1:24–26). In the first Christian centuries, believers in Egypt consulted books of oracles, selecting passages by lot. One, written in Coptic in the fifth or sixth century, calls itself a gospel and frames its answers in the language of Christian faith.[129] Latin collections of lot-answers circulated widely in the same period. Recent scholarship has shown that the conciliar condemnations once thought to forbid opening Scripture for guidance were aimed at one particular book of lot-oracles. Upon closer examination, almost all of the supposed evidence that the early church condemned seeking a word by opening the Bible disappears.[130]

The most celebrated conversion in Western Christianity came through an open book. In a garden in Milan, Augustine of Hippo heard a child's voice chanting "take up and read," opened the letters of Paul, read the first passage his eyes fell on (Romans 13:13–14), and his conversion followed at once.[131] Francis of Assisi and his first companions opened the Gospel book three times in prayer to learn how they should live, and the passages they received became the foundation of their rule.[132]

Protestants kept the practice as well. The Moravian Church, one of the oldest Protestant churches, made the lot a regular part of its life in the eighteenth century and used it for weighty decisions. It still publishes the Daily Watchwords each year, verses of Scripture whose Old Testament texts are drawn by lot at Herrnhut and read daily by Christians in many languages.[133] In 1739, John Wesley accepted the decision of a lot that he should go to Bristol, where his ministry of open-air preaching began. He later defended the lot for serious decisions when the reasons on each side seemed balanced, as a way of setting aside one's own will.[134] In the late nineteenth century, Protestant households kept promise boxes, small boxes of rolled Scripture verses from which one was drawn and pondered each day. They are still sold.[135]

Saints, reformers, and ordinary believers across the whole church have received a word from God through a drawing made without choosing, and the sacred table stands in their company. How the drawing is done has never been

the line between faithful and unfaithful practice. The heart of the one who draws, the prayer surrounding the drawing, and the fruit that follows have always decided it.

The historic objections

At many points in its history, the church has also spoken out against divination and against the cards. The objections deserve a fair hearing. Each had its grounds, most of which were sound, and once they are understood, the sacred table shares the concerns behind them.

Early councils imposed penances on Christians who consulted diviners or followed the customs of surrounding cults.[136] The young church lived amid a marketplace of paid oracles that preyed on the anxious and the poor. It also feared divided loyalty to the old gods, especially while Christians were still being pressured to sacrifice to them. In the fifth century, a council in Gaul forbade clergy from using a particular book of lot-oracles,[137] concerned for their dignity and wary that a holy office might be used for profit or idle curiosity. None of this applies to the sacred table: it is no marketplace, sells no certainty, and preys on no one's anxiety. Opened and closed in Christ, and consulting no other power, it divides no loyalty; its ministers are bound by a rule forbidding its use for profit or idle curiosity. The table rejects what the councils objected to as well.

The most influential Latin theologian of late antiquity wrote at length against the astrologers of his day, and later teachers carried his arguments on.[138] His real concern was fatalism, the teaching that the stars dictate human lives so that neither sin nor grace can change them, and he was right, because fatalism makes repentance and grace meaningless. Part Six showed the sacred table rejecting fatalism as firmly as he did. It keeps the future open, teaches that the human answer to God matters, and exists to make turning possible.

The great medieval synthesis drew its lines with care. It condemned divination that seeks hidden knowledge of the future from demons, openly or by tacit agreement, because that puts trust in something other than God. It permitted reading natural signs, the way a farmer reads the sky or a physician reads a pulse, and it permitted lots in genuine need, cast with reverence and prayer, as a way of seeking God's direction.[139] The sacred table falls entirely within what that teaching allows. It seeks God's direction and no hidden knowledge from other powers; it is carried out with reverence and prayer; and the need it serves is real—the discernment of a life before God.

In the fifteenth century, a famous Franciscan preacher from Siena spoke out against card-playing, and his hearers burned their decks in the public square.[140] Later that century, an anonymous friar wrote a sermon against dice, cards, and the triumphs, calling the trumps an invention of the devil. By listing them one by one, he left one of the earliest complete lists. The preachers were fighting gambling, which ruined families and fed violence. There is no gambling at the sacred table and no game. The images are used in prayer, and, as the history above shows, they came from within the church's own world.

The Reformation was suspicious of images and the medieval church's sacramentals, and some reformers removed images from churches altogether. Their fear was idolatry, the honor due to God alone being given to created things. Yet the Reformation churches upheld the principle that the Word joined to a visible sign is a means of grace, and several retained images, blessings, and devotional objects. The sacred table shares this fear of idolatry. The cards are nothing in themselves; every honor given to the images passes to the God they serve, and a holy thing that becomes an idol must be broken, as the bronze serpent was (2 Kings 18:4).

Between the middle of the fifteenth century and the middle of the eighteenth, tens of thousands of people in Europe and its colonies were tried and executed as witches, most of them women. Fear, along with social conflict and suspicion of the unfamiliar, drove the trials, and they fell hardest on healers, midwives, widows, the poor, and the marginal. The churches today look back on that history with grief. Its lesson here is that fear is not discernment. Historians of early Christianity have shown how often the language of the demonic has been turned against neighbors, dissenters, and rival communities, casting opponents as agents of Satan and letting fear do the work discernment should have done.[141] No practice can rightly be judged by the alarm of people who do not understand it. It has to be judged by what it is and by its fruits.

Many evangelical, Pentecostal, and charismatic Christians today warn that the cards open a door to the demonic. Their warnings stem from a genuine concern for spiritual safety and from the real experiences of people harmed by careless or fearful spiritual practice. Part Eight addresses that concern at length. The sacred table takes spiritual danger seriously, and its entire discipline of grounding in Christ, testing the spirits, and full discernment exists for that reason.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church

The most explicit objection in our own day is in the Catechism of the Catholic Church. All forms of divination are to be rejected, it teaches, including practices "falsely supposed to 'unveil' the future," because such practices "conceal a desire for power over time, history, and, in the last analysis, other human beings," together with a wish to conciliate hidden powers. Among those practices it names "consulting horoscopes, astrology, palm reading, interpretation of omens and lots."[142] The paragraph just before grants that "God can reveal the future to his prophets or to other saints," and teaches that a sound Christian attitude consists "in putting oneself confidently into the hands of Providence for whatever concerns the future, and giving up all unhealthy curiosity about it."[143]

Its rationale is specific and warrants careful consideration. It objects to practices that purport to disclose the future, whereas the sacred table makes no such claim. It also objects to the desire to exercise power over time, history, and other people; the table seeks no such power and entrusts every question to God through the prayer "your will be done." Any attempt to appease hidden powers is wholly absent from a table that consults no power other than God. The confident trust in Providence commended by the Catechism, together with the relinquishment of unhealthy curiosity, reflects precisely the spirit in which the table is maintained. Moreover, the prophets and saints whom it recognizes as recipients of divine revelation belong to the tradition within which Part Five situated the table.

Lots are explicitly mentioned, and this point merits a direct response. The response is the one provided in Part Six: at the table, a drawn card serves as an occasion for prayer and conversation; it is considered, but never obeyed, and is never interpreted as an omen that determines what will happen. Considered on its own terms, the Catechism's objection is directed at fortune-telling, and the sacred table is aligned with that objection. In any event, Rome represents one tradition within the universal church, and the same church teaches that new sacramentals may be instituted as the needs of the faithful require.[144] Roman canon law reserves the institution of new sacramentals to the Apostolic See.[145] This work does not ask Rome to act. Rather, it speaks from within communions that order their own sacramental life.

PART EIGHT
Spiritual warfare

The gravest concern about the sacred table is spiritual. Many Christians fear the cards open a door to powers opposed to God, and some can point to people who were harmed. That concern must be addressed on its own terms, with the full seriousness Scripture gives to the reality of evil. Spiritual danger is real here, and so is the possibility of spiritual oppression or possession. Neither is waved away. Most of what comes to the table is ordinary human trouble, and the first answer to it is ordinary love. Rightly kept, the practice turns out to be a place of watchfulness in the warfare of the soul, not a weak point in it.

Warfare waged from a victory

Scripture is clear that the Christian life is a struggle. "Our struggle is not against enemies of blood and flesh, but against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers of this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places" (Ephesians 6:12). Jesus encountered unclean spirits and cast them out, restoring people to their families and towns (Mark 1:23–27; 5:1–20). He gave his followers authority to do the same in his name (Mark 16:17), and the apostolic church exercised that authority (Acts 16:18). The church has always maintained a ministry of deliverance, and it belongs to the gospel.

Scripture is equally clear about the outcome. At the cross, Christ "disarmed the rulers and authorities and made a public example of them, triumphing over them" (Colossians 2:15). The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5). Nothing in all creation can separate the faithful from the love of God in Christ Jesus (Romans 8:38–39). When the disciples returned, rejoicing that even the demons submitted to them, Jesus told them to rejoice instead that their names were written in heaven (Luke 10:17–20). The warfare is real, but it is fought from a victory already won. It deserves great care, but never the spotlight.

Consider the armor Paul describes truth, righteousness, readiness to proclaim the gospel of peace, faith, salvation, the word of God, and prayer in the Spirit at all times (Ephesians 6:14–18). Each element represents a virtue, a gift, or a practice of prayer; none is a strategy rooted in fear. Christians are equipped through their grounding in God.

The mystical stream locates the source of every Christian victory in the cross, understood as the Redemptive Inversion described in Part Two. The powers opposed to God flourish through division, suffering that fragments a person, grief that remains unresolved, worship distorted by fear, and every circumstance in which a person is set against themselves, their neighbor, or God. Christ willingly endured the worst they could inflict, bearing it with undivided love, and they found nothing in him to exploit (John 14:30). The rulers of this age crucified the Lord of glory without understanding their actions (1 Corinthians 2:8), and the instrument of his death became his passage through their gates.

Every subsequent spiritual battle follows this pattern. Responding to fear with fear or force with force only strengthens these powers. Christians overcome them as Christ did: by becoming whole, bringing what has been divided back into the light of love, healing wounds that have remained unhealed, and restoring worship that fear has distorted. Every act of reconciliation, every restored memory, and every fear released through prayer leaves these powers with less to feed upon. A practice grounded in healing, recognition, and embodiment lies at the heart of spiritual warfare.

The heart, the first battlefield

The first and most constant battlefield of the spiritual life is the human heart. Jesus taught that evil intentions come from within, from the heart (Mark 7:21), and Paul spoke of taking every thought captive to obey Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). The Gospel of Mary describes the soul climbing past the powers that try to hold it, powers named darkness, desire, ignorance, and wrath in its many forms, until the soul, set free, declares that what bound it has been slain and its desire has come to an end (Gospel of Mary 15–17). Here the warfare of the soul is first a struggle to break free of what binds the heart from inside.

Contemplatives have described this struggle in considerable detail. The belief that one is separate from God, from others, and from creation gives rise to a constructed self—a false self that must defend itself through possession, reputation, achievement, and control, and that perceives any threat to these as a threat to its very existence.[146] This is not who the person truly is. Fear created it, and it is sustained by a mind that interprets everything in terms of opposition: mine and yours, winning and losing, good and evil divided between oneself and one's enemies.[147] The same tradition observes that much human suffering arises from identifying with the endless stream of thought, so

that a person mistakes the voice in their head for their true self and lives in remembered pain and anticipated fear, rather than in the present moment, where God is found.[148]

Force cannot overcome the false self, because resistance is part of its strategy and every act of resistance only makes it stronger. It comes undone by being seen, in stillness, in the presence of God, until the person remembers the self that was hidden with Christ in God all along (Colossians 3:3). On this understanding the adversary's oldest tactic is to convince a human being that they are alone and separate, that God is distant or hostile, and that their worth has to be defended at any cost. The Christian's first victory is the remembering that dissolves that conviction.

Watchfulness

In the fourth century, the desert mothers and fathers developed the Church's first systematic approach to spiritual warfare: a practice of attentiveness. They taught that the soul is assailed by thoughts, *or logismoi*, which arise and seek to draw it into gluttony, lust, avarice, sadness, anger, listlessness, vainglory, and pride.[149] They did not combat each thought through sheer force; instead, they observed it. They recognized it as it arose, named it, resisted being carried away by it, and redirected their attention to God. They called this practice watchfulness, or *nepsis*—the same term used in the First Letter of Peter: "Discipline yourselves, keep alert. Like a roaring lion your adversary the devil prowls around, looking for someone to devour. Resist him, steadfast in your faith" (1 Peter 5:8–9). The great collection of Eastern spiritual writings later assembled as the *Philokalia* is, in large part, a compendium of this watchfulness.[150]

The teaching that transmitted the practice from the desert to the Western Church refined it. It held that every thought originates from one of three sources: God, the adversary, or the self. Accordingly, the person who prays must become an approved money changer, tracing each thought to its origin and testing it as a money changer tests a coin—looking for the image of the true king stamped upon it and rejecting counterfeit thoughts, however brightly they may shine. This same teaching identifies discretion, the gift of sound judgment, as the source and root of all the virtues.[151] The work's refusal to issue verdicts derives from this principle. Discernment tests thoughts in the light of Christ; it makes no pronouncements about the spirits behind another person's life.

The teaching is older than the desert. One of the earliest Christian writings says that two angels accompany every person and are known by their works. The spirit of righteousness is "mild and reserved and meek and peaceful," and when it enters the heart, it speaks of justice, kindness, pardon, and charity; the other is "irritable and bitter and rash" (Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 6.2). The desert adds that the presence of God's angels works softly and peaceably, awakening joy.[152] Every later rule for discerning spirits grows from that root. It tests what moves in one's own heart by its fruits, and it is never a verdict about what moves in another person's life.

Today's teachers of contemplative prayer express this same idea in contemporary terms: the gentle, repeated return of attention to the present moment; the observation of thoughts without attachment; and the discovery, beneath the stream of thought, of a stillness in which one encounters God. Fifteen centuries later, this insight remains valid. Remaining attentive to the light offers the soul far greater protection than struggling against the darkness.

Cognitive therapy has identified these same thought patterns under different names: catastrophizing, all-or-nothing thinking, mind-reading, and fortune-telling, in the sense of predicting the worst. A card interpreted through fear can reinforce any of these patterns. Attentiveness at the table involves noticing when an interpretation of an image has shifted into one of these thoughts and gently naming it.[153]

The sacred table is that kind of attention. A person looks at an image and notices what arises within them, such as fear, longing, resentment, grief, or hope. The image brings thoughts to the surface so they can be seen, and the minister helps the person name what has come up, without judgment, and bring it into prayer. A thought that had been working in the shadows is brought into the light and seen for what it is. It is watchfulness in its most ordinary pastoral form.

The minister's temptations

Christ himself fought this battle in the wilderness, and the church has read the shape of his temptations as the shape of every temptation (Matthew 4:1–11; Luke 4:1–13). He is tempted to turn stones into bread, to throw himself from the pinnacle of the temple so angels will catch him in the sight of everyone, and to take all the kingdoms of the world in exchange for worship. Recent spiritual writers have called these the temptations to be relevant, spectacular, and powerful: to prove one's worth by meeting every need, to be admired for displays of spiritual power, and to control the world on one's own terms.[154]

Christ answers each by appealing to Scripture and to his trust in the Father, choosing humble obedience, hidden service, and love given away instead.

Anyone who keeps the sacred table will encounter the same three, and naming them is part of the practice's protection. A minister may want to be relevant, to become so indispensable that people depend on them rather than on God. A minister may want to be spectacular, to impress with dramatic insight and prophetic display. And a minister may want power, to steer people's choices, gather influence, or profit from fear. Each is a door through which real harm can enter, and each runs against the spirit in which the table is kept. The table's rule, with its refusal to encourage dependence, its humility about every word, its ban on control, and its rule of honest offering, is the minister's own armor here. Kept in that spirit, the practice follows Christ out of the wilderness.

Letting go, and falling upward

The medieval mystics of the Rhineland taught that the soul must become detached from everything that is not God, including its own will, its images of God, and even its longing for spiritual experiences, so that God may be born in the ground of the soul. They maintained that there is a ground in the soul where God and the soul meet and are not two, untouched by any created thing, and that the path to this ground is through letting go. Their term for this, *Gelassenheit*, or releasement, denotes a freedom that cannot be attained through striving but is received by consenting to let God be God. They likened the noble soul to a pearl hidden in the heart.[155] A fourteenth-century English contemplative expressed the same teaching in different words: place everything created beneath a cloud of forgetting, and reach toward God with a naked intent of love through the cloud of unknowing.[156]

Fortune-telling is motivated by the desire to understand the future and protect oneself from it, whereas detachment entails relinquishing precisely that desire for control. "Your will be done" (Matthew 6:10), the prayer at the center of every session, is a prayer of detachment. Those who approach the table with an anxious question about the future are helped to release their attachment to the outcome and find rest in God; that release is itself a victory in the spiritual struggle. The images are approached in the same way: they are used and then relinquished, allowing the soul to move beyond them toward God, who transcends every image.

The spiritual life does not climb in a straight line either. It passes through failure, loss, and the shattering of false securities, which, by grace, become the

way into a deeper life. The first half of life builds a container of identity, achievement, and certainty. The second half often begins when that container cracks and the person discovers the crack was a door.[157] The cross is the pattern: death that becomes resurrection, the grain of wheat that falls into the earth and bears much fruit (John 12:24).

Twentieth-century analytic psychology described a related reality as the shadow: those aspects of the self that a person refuses to acknowledge, which operate unseen and often destructively. These aspects must be recognized and integrated for the person to become whole.[158] The spiritual tradition recognizes the same truth in the hidden faults from which the psalmist prays to be cleared (Psalm 19:12), and in the light that exposes what is in darkness so that it may become light (Ephesians 5:13).

Clinicians who do not pray have observed that the shadow contains more than what a person fears. It also contains the gifts a person has disowned: tenderness concealed behind competence, authority concealed behind deference, and joy concealed behind duty. This golden shadow belongs to the blessing that preceded every brokenness, and images can reveal it as readily as they reveal a fault.[159] A Christian guide to shadow work using a biblical deck identifies what holds all of this together: grace. None of us encounters our own shadow alone. God accompanies the one who looks, offering strength, wisdom, and healing at every step. Held in this way, self-examination becomes a path of redemption undertaken in community.[160]

The tarot's images speak directly to this realm. The Tower, struck by fire from heaven, depicts false structures crumbling; in the light of the cross, that collapse can be understood as grace. Death depicts the ending through which transformation becomes possible. The Devil depicts bondage, and in the most widely used modern deck, the figures chained to the Devil's pedestal wear chains loose enough to slip off—a vivid portrayal of bondages that constrain people only because they have not yet recognized their freedom.[161] The same card can depict a person in both ways at once. The figure in the Ten of Wands bears a crushing burden out of genuine and faithful love. At the sacred table, such images allow a person to recognize their own shadow, false securities, and bondage without condemnation, in the presence of a God who loves them. Recognition is where release begins. "So, if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed" (John 8:36).

Powers opposed to God. None of this reduces spiritual warfare to psychology. The mystical tradition of the Church holds that certain spiritual beings direct their will toward exercising mastery over others—beings that may be described as oriented toward serving themselves rather than others. They

exist within the same divine reality as every creature, and their capacity to cause harm gives them no power to separate any creature from God (Romans 8:38–39). This tradition also recognizes that patterns within the psyche and habits shared by institutions can take a terrible hold on human beings, and that evil sometimes emerges from countless small choices in favor of self until it seems to act with a mind of its own. Scripture does not insist on a single account. It traces temptation to desire, to the heart, and to the powers (James 1:14; Mark 7:21; Ephesians 6:12). Some thoughts come from ourselves, some from opposing powers, and some from God, which is why every thought must be tested (1 John 4:1). The desert teachers observed that what opposes us is shaped by what it finds within us, and that against a heart filled with God, it is little more than smoke.[162] Christ confronted every such power with authority and without fear. They never frightened or fascinated him, and he was never in a hurry to speak about them. He spoke a word, set the person free, and restored them to their community (Mark 5:15–20).

The sacred table maintains the same balance and responds in the same way, whichever account of a particular affliction proves true. It names the harm that can be recognized and asks what protection is needed. No card is ever interpreted as revealing the cause of anyone's fear, and if the images heighten fear, they are set aside. It takes every thought captive to Christ (2 Corinthians 10:5). It offers anyone who is afraid the church's prayer for protection—as prayer, never as confirmation of any cause—helping them stand firm in who they are in Christ (Ephesians 6:10–11), remain alert (1 Peter 5:8), seal the boundaries of their life in prayer, and fill the swept house with God so that it is not left empty (Matthew 12:43–45). It never seeks out dark spirits, attempts to use them, or frightens anyone with them.

Every such experience is treated with the utmost seriousness, and the minister offers no verdict. No one is told that a demon has attached itself to them, nor is anyone who is frightened told that nothing is there. The restoration of the afflicted man in Mark 5:1–20 returns him to his family and town; it provides no warrant for identifying a spirit as the cause of another person's distress. The minister prays with the person in the name of Christ, remains present, and discerns the situation over time through prayer and shared judgment, attending to every aspect of the person's life: body, health, mind, history, relationships, and spirit. Most concerns brought forward are ordinary human troubles, and the first response is ordinary love: listening, food, rest, assistance from a doctor or counselor, and practical support. When requested, the church's ministry of prayer for deliverance and freedom is offered by those authorized to provide it, in the name of Christ, as prayer—not

as a pronouncement about the nature of the affliction. Medical and psychological care may be necessary, and such care is welcomed as a partner, since God heals through these means and is jealous of neither. Prayer accompanies the person through every treatment, because the one who suffers is always a soul before God. No one is blamed for their affliction or defined as evil, since the first word God speaks over every person is blessing.

Encircled in prayer

The insular saints of Ireland and Britain prayed for protection in their own way, and their prayers show the spirit the sacred table is kept in. St. Patrick's Breastplate binds to the one who prays the strength of the Trinity, the power of Christ's incarnation, death, and resurrection, the love of the angels and the prayers of the saints, and the strength of creation, and then surrounds them with Christ: Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left.[163] The encircling prayer, the *caim*, was prayed while tracing a circle with a finger around oneself or another, asking God to keep within the circle what is good and without it what would harm.[164] At the sacred table the cards go down inside that circle. Some who pray with them lay out their cards in a mandala, a picture of wholeness with Christ in the middle, and the spread becomes its own little *caim* drawn on the table.[165] Columba's biographer records the saint's prayers and blessings against every power that threatened the people in his care.[166]

From its earliest writings the church has also held that every believer goes with an angel, a guide "like a father," a teacher and a shepherd. Christ says the angels of the little ones always behold the face of the Father (Matthew 18:10). The household praying for Peter assumes he has his own angel (Acts 12:15). Raphael walks the road beside Tobias (Tobit 5). Prayer for help in a moral or spiritual struggle draws that help near, counsel, encouragement, and illumination coming in answer, and the prayer changes the one who prays as well.[167] The person at the table is never alone with the image.

These are prayers of trust. They do not dwell on darkness. Rather, they surround the person with Christ, the Trinity, the company of heaven, and the goodness of creation, and rest in that assurance. The sacred table is opened and closed in the same spirit. The session is grounded in Christ's presence; the Holy Spirit is invoked; the table is encircled with prayer; and every impression is tested in Christ's name, in accordance with the apostolic teaching that "every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God" (1

John 4:2) and that "no one can say 'Jesus is Lord' except by the Holy Spirit" (1 Corinthians 12:3). Nothing is summoned, bargained with, or bound. The saints are prayed with, in communion with the whole church and in keeping with the church's historic practice; they are never called up. The session concludes with thanksgiving and blessing. Thereafter, the minister prays for the person by name and for their own protection, and brings anything troubling to their soul friend, supervisor, or confessor.

Light does not argue with darkness

A common fear is that the sacred table permits darkness to enter. When properly observed, it does the opposite. It is a place of watchfulness where hidden bondage is recognized and brought into the light. "Those who do what is true come to the light, so that it may be clearly seen that their deeds have been done in God" (John 3:21). "Everything exposed by the light becomes visible, for everything that becomes visible is light" (Ephesians 5:13–14).

Genuine spiritual harm does not originate in material objects. It arises in the heart through fear, pride, the desire for control, unforgiveness, despair, and the false self sustained by these forces. A Bible can be misused in the same way, and even the bread of the Last Supper became the occasion for Judas's darkness (John 13:27). A practice that brings fear, pride, control, unforgiveness, and despair into the light of Christ, acknowledges them without condemnation, and helps individuals release them constitutes spiritual warfare in the fullest sense. People have approached the sacred table burdened by grief, shame, old resentments, and the fear that God was against them, and have departed with a greater sense of freedom. That freedom is the fruit by which the practice asks to be judged.

The mystical tradition offers its own understanding of evil. In human experience, evil is real and causes suffering, and the church opposes it by every means available to it. In the depths of God, evil has neither ultimate reality nor the final word, because nothing can separate creation from God's love. Many within the church hope—and this tradition holds as a conviction—that God's love will ultimately reconcile all things to God (Colossians 1:20), so that even darkness will at last be undone by the light.[168] After years of contemplation on sin and suffering, a fourteenth-century English anchoress received the assurance that all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well.[169]

This conviction determines how the sacred table confronts evil. It does not argue with darkness, bargain with it, or become preoccupied with it.

Instead, it continues to shine. It grounds individuals in Christ, brings what is hidden into the light, and trusts the light to accomplish its work. "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). This is how spiritual warfare is waged: through presence, prayer, and love. The whole church is called to this work.

PART NINE
Benefits and uses

"You will know them by their fruits" (Matthew 7:16). Part Four described the power of the sacred table in general terms; this part examines its practical application, from an individual praying alone at dawn to the bedside of the dying. With respect to research, its claims are measured. Where the church's longstanding pastoral experience speaks, they are confident.

Personal prayer and the daily office

The simplest application is personal prayer. A person may keep a blessed deck as part of their daily rule and draw a single card in the morning and evening, within the context of the psalms and prayers of the office.[170] The morning card is received as a word for the day, an image to carry, a question to consider, or a quality to cultivate. In the evening, it becomes an examen. The day is reviewed in its light, gratitude is expressed, failures are confessed, and the day is entrusted to God.

This practice offers what every disciplined rule of prayer provides: a place to begin when words fail. It trains attention, helping a person notice God in the ordinary events of the day, and joins prayer to daily life, as the morning's image continues to resonate in the day's circumstances. The monastic tradition has long sanctified the hours with psalmody and prayer and taught that work and prayer belong together.[171] A seventeenth-century lay brother, who found God as readily among the pots and pans of a monastery kitchen as at the altar, described the practice of the presence of God as a continual turning of attention toward God amid ordinary work.[172] Daily prayer at the sacred table is one way to practice that presence. Over time, it teaches a person to read the world itself as an image through which God speaks, until the kingdom spread throughout the earth becomes visible (Gospel of Thomas 113).

Spiritual direction

The sacred table is often used within spiritual direction and companionship as one of the means by which a director and the person receiving direction attend to God together. Direction is a long-term relationship, usually meeting monthly, in which the director listens, asks questions, prays, and helps the other person notice where God is moving in their life. The director makes no

decisions on the person's behalf; the person's own discernment is honored throughout.[173]

Within this relationship, the cards are always optional, and listening comes first. Sometimes a person reaches an impasse, cannot find words, or repeatedly circles a question without being able to engage with it. The director may ask whether it would be helpful to explore what the person is carrying through an image. If the person agrees, one to three cards are drawn. The person speaks first about what they see, and the director offers reflections in the form of questions. Often, the image opens a way into what the person had not yet been able to express, and a movement of consolation or desolation that had been unfolding beneath the surface becomes visible and can be brought before God. The tradition of discernment that teaches people to notice these movements is one of the church's great gifts, and the image serves it.[174]

Grief

Grief is among the most common reasons people come to the sacred table, and this is where the practice bears some of its clearest fruit. Grief often defies words. Those who are bereaved may feel numb or overwhelmed, or may be unable to speak of the person they have lost without becoming distressed. An image can give form to what cannot yet be expressed. Someone looking at a figure mourning over spilled cups may notice, perhaps for the first time, the cups still standing behind the figure and find there the beginning of a way to carry both the loss and what remains.

Research on grief has moved away from the idea that healthy mourning requires severing one's bond with the dead. Many people maintain continuing bonds with those they have lost, and those bonds can be part of grieving well.[175] The Christian tradition has always understood such bonds within the communion of saints, where the living and the dead remain joined in Christ, for God "is God not of the dead, but of the living; for to him all of them are alive" (Luke 20:38). The sacred table holds grief within that communion. It does not attempt to summon the dead or convey messages from them. Rather, it helps the bereaved bring their love, sorrow, regrets, and hope before God, and reminds them that love does not end. If a sense of the beloved dead's presence arises, it is received humbly, as a gift that may be held or set aside, but never regarded as certain. Grief is tender, and no one's grief is ever used to claim special power or solicit money.

Decisions

People come to the sacred table at crossroads. Should I accept the job, end the relationship, move, enter a vocation, or forgive the person who hurt me? The practice makes none of these decisions for anyone, nor does it predict their outcomes. It helps the person discern.

The church's tradition of discernment offers a careful method for making choices before God. The person is invited to become free of disordered attachments, weigh the reasons on each side, notice the consolation and desolation stirred by each option, and consider the choice from the perspective of life's end, asking which decision they would wish to have made.[176] Images can help at every stage. They bring attachments into view, draw out the feelings stirred by each option, and allow the imagination to explore possible paths in prayer. Counselors have a term for the ambivalence many people experience at a crossroads: wanting and not wanting something at the same time. They explore this through open questions and listen for the person's own reasons for change, without advocating either course. The images serve a similar purpose. They hold both sides of a person's heart in view, allowing the decision that emerges to be the person's own.[177] If a session considers where a path may lead, it does so in the manner of wisdom literature—as foresight offered so that the person may choose freely: "The clever see danger and hide" (Proverbs 22:3). The result is a decision made freely, accompanied by the peace of having brought it before God. "The human mind plans the way, but the LORD directs the steps" (Proverbs 16:9).

Communities may use the same practice. A congregation, religious community, or ministry team facing a significant decision may use images as prompts for shared listening and prayer, as Christian communities have long used Scripture, silence, and, in some traditions, the lot to seek God's guidance together (Acts 1:24–26; 15:28).

Reconciliation and confession

The sacred table often provides a setting for reconciliation. By contemplating an image that reflects their own circumstances, a person may recognize what they have been avoiding, just as David saw himself in Nathan's parable (2 Samuel 12:1–7). A figure carrying a bundle of swords, walking away from a scene of conflict, or standing alone outside a warmly lit house may bring to mind a broken relationship, an unconfessed wrong, or a resentment held for years.

The practice then helps the person bring what they have recognized before God. This may involve an examination of conscience, a decision to approach someone they have harmed and make amends, or a willingness to forgive someone who has harmed them. If the person wishes, it may lead to confession and absolution in the sacrament of reconciliation. "Confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed" (James 5:16). The sacred table does not replace any of the church's rites of reconciliation. Rather, it opens the way to them, and many people who might otherwise have avoided confession have found their way there through an image that revealed their own heart.

Healing of memory

Many who come carry wounds from the past, including abuse, abandonment, violence, betrayal, and the lasting effects of trauma. They are owed particular care. Those who study trauma have shown that recovery depends first on safety, and that individuals must remain in control of how and when painful memories are approached.[178] The sacred table respects this. The person decides whether to use the cards and what to speak about, and may stop at any moment. The minister never presses, never interprets someone's history for them, and never claims to see what has not been told. The images are never used to establish whether abuse happened, to recover an uncertain memory, or to infer what another person has done.

The container has to be safe enough, and the pace has to be one the body can bear. Confrontation is never forced. The minister watches for the signs that a person is overwhelmed, a held breath, a fixed stare, a voice that goes far away, and slows down, comes back to the present, or stops. Deep work of this kind is never done alone. The person is accompanied, and the minister is accompanied in turn.[179]

Within those limits, images can be helpful. A person can approach a painful memory from a safe distance, speaking about a figure on a card before speaking about themselves. Images can offer a sense of protection, restoration, and hope that a person may not yet be able to imagine for themselves. The church's ministry of the healing of memories, in which past wounds are brought to Christ in prayer, finds a natural setting at the sacred table. Some congregations shaped by integral theology now include shadow work and inner healing among the ordinary purposes of the church, alongside growth in prayer and practice.[180] Where a person's healing requires medical or psychological care, the minister helps them access it and continues to

accompany them in prayer, holding the wound before God throughout every stage of its healing.

Those outside the churches

Some of the most important work of the sacred table takes place with people outside the churches. Many describe themselves as spiritual but not religious. Many have been deeply hurt by churches through harsh preaching, exclusion, or abuse, and will not enter a sanctuary again. Many have no religious background at all. Yet many are seeking God, and some will sit at a table where an image is placed because it feels safe, familiar, and free of pressure.

The table meets them where they are, as Jesus met the Samaritan woman at the well (John 4:7–26) and as Paul began at Athens with an inscription on one of their altars (Acts 17:22–23). It does not coerce, argue, or recruit. It offers welcome, attention, and prayer. There, many people encounter, perhaps for the first time, a God who is not angry with them, who knows them, and who loves them. The insular saints practiced the same hospitality in their mission, welcoming people into belonging before asking them to believe and allowing faith to grow within a community of friendship.[181] "Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it" (Hebrews 13:2). For people who might otherwise remain unreached, the table is a doorway through which grace enters.

Retreat, chaplaincy, and the classroom

On retreat, the twenty-two trumps can be prayed as a pilgrimage over the course of a day or a week, with each image serving as the focus of a period of meditation, much as the Stations of the Cross are prayed. Chaplains in hospitals, hospices, prisons, universities, and the military provide spiritual care to people of all faiths and none. The table can form part of that care, always with the person's consent and in accordance with the institution's policies. In a hospice, an image can help a dying person and their family speak about what matters most: love, regret, forgiveness, fear, and hope. In a prison, it can help someone who has caused great harm examine their life honestly and find a path toward repentance and a different future. In recovery communities, it can help a person name the powers to which they have surrendered and the higher power to which they have entrusted their life.

The trumps can also serve as teaching tools. They depict the cardinal and theological virtues, the turning of fortune, death, judgment, and the world

made whole, making them a pictorial catechism of the Christian understanding of the moral life and the last things. A study group, an adult confirmation class, or a parish education series can use them to explore the virtues and Christian hope, much as the medieval church used its painted walls and windows to teach those who could not read.[182] One recent Christian deck teaches these themes directly, with a biblical scene on every card. Its Hanged Man is Christ on the cross. Temperance depicts a baptism, and the Star is the one over Bethlehem. The Wheel is Ezekiel's wheel. The Hermit is Daniel alone in the lions' den, and the Lovers are Tobias and Sarah, brought together under the care of the angel Raphael. A confirmation class could devote an entire season to that deck.[183]

The practice also nourishes the Christian imagination. The church has always prayed through art, and many who maintain the table discover their own creativity awakening. Some draw or paint their own images; others write prayers and poems for each card or keep a journal of the images that have spoken to them. The capacity to imagine is part of the image of God in a person, and its renewal is part of the healing of the soul. A practice that teaches people to see with the eyes of the heart (Ephesians 1:18) and to respond with creative love participates in God's own creativity.

Images also speak across languages and traditions. People of different faiths can sit together before one image and share what they see, often discovering how much they have in common: a shared longing for meaning, healing, justice, and communion with the holy. Part Ten shows that many traditions preserve their own sacred signs. A Christian practice that honors those signs and welcomes people of other faiths to its table without pressure contributes to mutual respect between religious communities that the world badly needs.

Safeguards

Each of these benefits depends on how the practice is conducted. A table that harms people, fosters dependence, or exploits fear would bear harmful fruit and forfeit its goodness. Accordingly, the practice includes safeguards that are integral to it and are not optional.

Consent is paramount. No one is pressured to participate; the cards are presented only when a person freely chooses to use them, and they may stop at any time. A minor may participate only with the consent of a parent or guardian and in accordance with the communion's safeguarding standards. In a crisis, safety takes precedence: if someone is at risk of harming themselves or

another person, the session ends, and the minister helps them obtain emergency assistance immediately. The minister operates within the limits of their competence, does not diagnose illness, never advises anyone to discontinue medical or psychological treatment, and refers people to other forms of care when their needs require it. What is shared at the table is held in sacred confidence, subject to the limits imposed by safety considerations and the law; those limits are explained at the outset. Boundaries are firm. The minister does not enter into a romantic or sexual relationship with anyone they accompany and does not use the practice to exert influence over another person's life. Dependence is discouraged; when someone repeatedly returns with the same anxious question, they are encouraged to rest in God.

A related risk is a table that merely affirms. When a person draws cards until they receive the answer they wanted, or interprets every image as confirmation, the practice has become an echo chamber. This is a reason to pause, invite other perspectives, and, at times, seek additional care; it is never a cause for shame.[184] Any fee is disclosed in advance, covers time and care rather than an outcome, and is reduced or waived for those unable to pay. Assistance in a crisis is always provided without charge. Spiritual darkness is discerned carefully, never presumed and never dismissed. Each minister is accountable to a spiritual companion, supervisor, or confessor, as well as to the communion in which they serve. Appendix B presents these safeguards in the form of a model rule.

These are the ordinary ethics of responsible pastoral care. The sacred table observes them because it constitutes pastoral care and because its fruits matter.

PART TEN
The wider family of faiths

The seventh thesis calls for reverence toward the sacred table and extends that same reverence to the sacred symbols that other religious traditions preserve in prayer. The latter point is as important as the former. A Christian who asks that the cards on a blessed table be treated with respect while ridiculing the holy objects of a neighbor's faith has not understood the request.

The argument of this work renders this point a natural one. Christ is the true light that enlightens everyone (John 1:9); accordingly, that light may be expected wherever people sincerely seek God. One Light shines through many windows, but this neither makes every window the same nor makes Christ one window among many. The Light shining through every window is the Light that took flesh in Christ, and God "has not left himself without a witness" among any people (Acts 14:17).

A note on method. Each tradition below is described on its own terms, insofar as an external account permits, and none is recast to fit Christian categories. This work does not claim that these practices are identical or that they hold the same meaning for those who observe them. It claims only that each is a religious act, maintained within a living faith, and deserving of the reverence accorded to holy things. Where a practice belongs to a people whose custodians alone may speak about it, the work acknowledges this and proceeds no further.

Sacred signs across the faiths

Among the Yoruba of West Africa, and in the diaspora traditions that developed from them in the Americas, Ifá is a priestly system of divination devoted to Orunmila, the orisha of wisdom. Its priests, the babaláwo, undergo many years of training to cast sacred palm nuts or the divining chain on a carved tray and to recite from memory the verses of the 256 odu, the sacred figures through which counsel is given. Each consultation is an act of worship, and the counsel often includes prayer and offering. In 2005, the Ifá divination system was recognized as a masterpiece of the oral and intangible heritage of humanity.[185] Cowrie-shell divination in the Lukumí tradition of Cuba and the United States is likewise conducted by initiated priests as part of worship. For those who observe these faiths, divination is among the central rites of religion.

The Book of Changes is one of the Confucian classics and is also used in Daoist practice. Its sixty-four hexagrams, obtained by counting yarrow stalks or casting coins, are interpreted with the aid of commentaries traditionally associated with Confucius. He is remembered as having wished for more years so that he could study the Changes and thereby be free of great faults.[186] Consulting the Changes is a discipline of moral cultivation: a means of bringing conduct into harmony with the way of Heaven in a world that is continually changing.

Tibetan Buddhist monastics and lay practitioners cast dice or count the beads of a mala after praying to Manjushri, the bodhisattva of wisdom, in order to seek guidance in making decisions. A distinguished nineteenth-century teacher of the Nyingma tradition wrote a manual for this practice, which remains part of Buddhist devotional life.[187] Hindu tradition regards the science of light, jyotisha, as one of the six auxiliary disciplines that support the study of the Vedas. Families consult it, often through priests and in the context of worship, to identify auspicious times for marriage, naming ceremonies, pilgrimage, and the consecration of temples.

At Shinto shrines and Buddhist temples in Japan, worshipers draw slips of counsel, omikuji, after prayer. A slip bearing an unfavorable message is often tied to a tree or frame on the shrine grounds, leaving the misfortune in the keeping of the kami. This is an ordinary devotional practice, particularly at the New Year.

Part Six showed that the Hebrew Scriptures record the Urim and Thummim and the casting of lots before the Lord. Purim takes its name from the lots, pur, that Haman cast to select a day for destroying the Jews—a plan God turned into deliverance (Esther 3:7; 9:24–26). In later centuries, some Jewish communities maintained the goral, a prayerful casting of lots involving the text of Scripture. One form bears the name of the Vilna Gaon, although historians question whether he devised it, and rabbinic authorities have long disagreed about its use.

In the Qur'an, a single word, ayah, means both a verse of scripture and a sign in creation. God promises to show human beings "Our signs in the horizons and within themselves until it becomes clear to them that it is the truth" (Qur'an 41:53). Night and day, rain, and the diversity of human languages and colors are all signs (Qur'an 30:22). Islam teaches istikhara, a prayer for guidance before a decision. It asks God to make a matter easy if it is good, to turn it away if it is not, and to grant contentment with the good wherever it may lie.[188] It is a prayer, not a device, and seeks what is good rather than knowledge of the future. In parts of the Muslim world, believers also

open the Qur'an or, in Iran, the poems of Hafez, seeking a word of guidance through prayer—a practice questioned by many Muslim scholars. Both the prayer and the debate belong to that faith, and this work reports them without taking a position.

Ogham was carved into memorial stones in Ireland during the centuries when the island was embracing Christianity, and medieval Irish scholars associated its letters with trees. Modern Druid practice has developed ogham into a contemplative discipline in which practitioners draw a stave and reflect on the tree it names, reading the living earth as a teacher.[189] A Roman historian writing in the first century recorded that Germanic peoples cut lots from the branch of a fruit-bearing tree, marked them, cast them onto a white cloth, and interpreted them after prayer to the gods, either by a priest or the head of a household.[190] Contemporary Heathen practice retains rune-casting as part of worship.

Many Indigenous nations of the Americas and elsewhere maintain their own ceremonial practices for seeking guidance. These practices belong to those nations; only their keepers may describe or teach them, and this work does not presume to do so.

What they share

These practices vary widely in theology, method, and the meanings their practitioners assign to them. Most share five features that make each a religious act. Each seeks guidance from the holy—whether God, the gods, the bodhisattvas, the ancestors, or the way of Heaven. Each takes place within a context of ritual and prayer. Each is often conducted by trained ministers or priests, and always by people acting in faith. Each is directed toward right living, understood as harmony, wisdom, virtue, or faithfulness. The instruments used in each practice are set apart and handled with reverence: the divining tray, the yarrow stalks, the mala, the shrine slip, the stave, and the blessed deck. Istikhara is the clear exception: it is a prayer that uses no instrument. The sacred table shares all five features, placing it within a broad human family of practices through which people of faith seek the holy through signs.

Scholars who study these practices across cultures increasingly describe them as ways of knowing: practices through which communities interpret experience, make meaning, reach decisions, and repair relationships, rather than attempts to forecast events.[191] Their conclusion supports the argument of Part Six. Across faiths, seeking the holy through signs constitutes discernment

and meaning-making within a relationship with the sacred. It belongs to religion and is distinct from the commercial trade in predictions.

Reverence and liberty for all

The early church held that no people has ever been beyond God's care. In the Greek text of Deuteronomy, when the Most High divided the nations, he fixed their bounds "according to the number of the angels of God" (Deuteronomy 32:8, Greek version). Daniel speaks of the angels of Persia and Greece (Daniel 10:13–21), and the teachers of Alexandria held that angelic presiding powers were distributed among the nations and cities.[192] On this view, every people's search for the holy has had spiritual companions, and its sacred signs deserve reverence for that reason.

Christ gave his followers a rule that settles the question: "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12). The reverence accorded to the sacred table is likewise owed to the divining tray of the babaláwo, the yarrow stalks of the scholar of the Changes, the mala of the lama, the shrine slip tied to a branch, and the stave of the Druid. Paul did not mock the altars he encountered in Athens. He carefully read one of their inscriptions and began with it: "Athenians, I see how extremely religious you are in every way" (Acts 17:22–23). This is the posture Christians are called to adopt toward the sacred things of others, as well as the posture others are asked to adopt toward the sacred table.

Part Eleven's argument for liberty extends to all these practices. Each is an exercise of religion, maintained within a living faith by people acting according to conscience, and each merits recognition and protection as religious expression. A society that protects the free exercise of religion cannot protect the sacraments of some faiths while dismissing the sacred signs of others as entertainment or fraud. Liberty of conscience cannot be granted to one faith at a time.

Should Christians affirm the divinatory practices of other religions? Nothing here asks Christians to Practice the rites of other faiths. It asks them to respect those rites as religious acts and to defend the liberty of those who observe them. Scripture provides a sound basis for that respect, as does early Christian teaching that seeds of the Word are sown among all peoples, so that whatever has been rightly said anywhere also belongs to Christians. This is consistent with the modern churches' statement that they reject nothing true and holy in other religions.[193] A Christian who holds a narrower view of other faiths can nevertheless grant what is asked here: respect and liberty.

Does placing these practices side by side blur genuine differences? The differences are real, and this section has sought to honor them by describing each tradition on its own terms and leaving Indigenous ways to their own custodians. The claim is modest. These practices are not said to be identical, to lead to the same end, or to carry the same meaning. Each is a religious act, observed within a living faith, and deserving of the reverence due to holy things. Rather than blurring the differences, this claim makes respect for them possible.

PART ELEVEN
Why this practice should be protected

If the sacred table is a true sacrament and a useful sacramental, if it belongs to the prophetic tradition of Scripture and the church, and if it is not fortune-telling, then its use constitutes an act of religion. It is a form of religious expression and must be recognized and protected as such under the liberty of conscience and freedom of religion, just as every other sacrament and sacramental is. Like confession, baptism, anointing, and the Eucharist, it is neither entertainment nor fortune-telling and is entitled to the same protection as those rites.

The minister's right derives first from God and the church, and only thereafter from the state; accordingly, the church's own teaching is the primary consideration here. American law is discussed briefly to demonstrate that the civil order protects what the church already affirms. This is a theological apologia, not a legal treatise. The legal points are summarized, with sources provided in the notes. Nothing in this work constitutes legal advice, and anyone facing a legal question should consult an attorney.

Liberty of conscience

God does not coerce faith. Throughout Scripture, God places choices before human beings and awaits their response. "Choose this day whom you will serve" (Joshua 24:15). "I have set before you life and death... Choose life" (Deuteronomy 30:19). The risen Christ stands at the door and knocks (Revelation 3:20), but does not force it open. When a rich young man heard his call and went away grieving, Christ let him go (Mark 10:22); when two disciples wished to call down fire upon a Samaritan village that would not receive him, he rebuked them (Luke 9:54–55). Faith that is coerced is not faith, and God has never desired it.

Before the authorities of their day, the apostles asserted this liberty. When the council in Jerusalem ordered them to stop teaching in the name of Jesus, Peter replied, "We must obey God rather than any human authority" (Acts 5:29). Paul taught that matters of practice are subject to each believer's conscience before God: "Let all be fully convinced in their own minds" (Romans 14:5). "Who are you to pass judgment on servants of another? It is before their own lord that they stand or fall" (Romans 14:4). He also asked,

"why should my liberty be subject to the judgment of someone else's conscience?" (1 Corinthians 10:29).

The early church conveyed the same message to an empire seeking to destroy it. A third-century North African Christian writer told a Roman governor that it is a fundamental human right for each person to worship according to their own convictions, and that it is no part of religion to compel religion.[194] A teacher of the next century wrote that religion cannot be imposed by force, since nothing is so much a matter of free will.[195] The martyrs of every age chose death rather than act against conscience, and the church honors them for it.

The principle has been affirmed in parts of the church in every century since. At the Diet of Worms in 1521, Martin Luther declared that his conscience was captive to the Word of God and That acting against conscience was neither right nor safe. Roger Williams founded Rhode Island in 1636 on what he called soul liberty, and the Society of Friends made liberty of conscience a founding principle of Pennsylvania. In 1965, the Second Vatican Council declared that the human person has a right to religious freedom grounded in human dignity, so that no one is to be forced to act against their own beliefs.[196] East, West, and the Reformation are in agreement on this.

A church that claims liberty of conscience for itself must also acknowledge that liberty in others. A Christian who asks the state to refrain from interfering with the sacraments of one church cannot, without contradiction, ask it to interfere with the sacramentals of another. Liberty of conscience is not divisible; moreover, it was a Christian principle before it became a civil one.

The rights of ministers and those who seek

Ordination constitute the primary basis for the right to maintain and offer the sacred table. Ordination entrusts a priest with the care of souls, together with the duty and authority to pray, bless, counsel, and accompany. Part Three demonstrated that each church may institute sacramentals and order its own rites, and that a priest acting in accordance with a communion's rule may bless and use them. Blessing a deck and maintaining the sacred table in accordance with that rule constitute the ordinary exercise of priestly authority. The priesthood of all believers grants every baptized person the right to pray with the same images in their own devotion (1 Peter 2:9).

Conscience is the second basis. A minister who is persuaded before God that the sacred table is a means of grace is bound by that conviction, since "whatever does not proceed from faith is sin" (Romans 14:23). Abandoning a

practice believed to be holy solely because others disapprove would constitute an act against conscience. Maintaining it faithfully, under discipline, and with its fruits open to scrutiny is what conscience requires.

Those who seek this practice have a corresponding right. Scripture commends seeking counsel: "in an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Proverbs 11:14), and "without counsel, plans go wrong" (Proverbs 15:22). Individuals are free to seek spiritual counsel where conscience leads and to receive it in the form they choose; neither church nor state may make that choice for them.

What civil law protects

In the United States, the First Amendment protects both the free exercise of religion and freedom of speech, and the courts have established principles that bear directly on the sacred table. Courts may not determine whether a religious belief is true. They may inquire only whether it is sincerely held.[197] A belief need not appear reasonable to others to receive protection, nor must it be shared by every member of a faith.[198] A law that targets a religious practice is presumed invalid.[199] A church determines its own faith, rites, and ministers without state interference.[200] A ministry that serves people outside its own faith remains religious.[201] Counsel provided in conversation constitutes speech, which the state may not remove from First Amendment protection by characterizing it as treatment.[202] These questions concerning speech remain unsettled, and counsel should review them before anyone relies on them.[203]Read together, these principles give strong grounds for protecting a practice kept as worship and pastoral care, under ordination and within a church's own rite, as religious expression. How they apply in a given case always depends on the particular law and the facts, which is a question for counsel. The state has no say in whether it is true. It may not be singled out, relabeled as fortune-telling, or regulated as though it were a commercial forecast. The church defines its own rites, and a sacramental a church has received is an exercise of religion in the full sense the First Amendment protects.

The fortune-telling cases support the same conclusion. Several American courts have invalidated laws prohibiting fortune-telling on the ground that they burden protected speech.[204] One federal court of appeals reached the opposite conclusion in a case in which the practitioner claimed that her work was religious. The court found that her beliefs constituted a personal way of life rather than a religion and permitted the county to regulate her work.[205]

That decision demonstrates why a church's own definition and rites are significant. A practice situated within a church, conducted under ordination, and supported by written rites, a written ethic, a system of accountability, and a fully developed theology constitutes religion as lived on an entirely different footing from a private way of life. This work, together with the record of the practice in Appendix A, forms part of the evidence supporting that conclusion.

Many American states exempt clergy who provide counsel within the scope of their ministry from licensing requirements for professional counselors. [CITATION NEEDED: a survey of state clergy exemptions.] The applicable conditions vary by state, and in some jurisdictions depend on whether a fee is charged. A minister of the sacred table should be familiar with the law of their state and comply with it.

Rights entail duties. The law protects sincere religious practice but has never protected fraud, and courts may inquire into the sincerity of a claimed belief. The table's rule is more stringent than the law. It does not sell certainty, promise outcomes, or exploit fear for gain, and it provides assistance freely in times of crisis. Accordingly, a minister who adheres to this rule can address questions of sincerity with a clear record.

Some may be concerned that protecting this liberty will shelter fraud. It will not. Courts may assess sincerity, and laws prohibiting deception for gain apply to everyone. The request is that sincere religious practice not be treated as fraud merely because others do not share its convictions. Those who violate the table's rule should be held accountable, first by the church and, where applicable, by the law.

The same protection applies to the sacred signs of other faiths. Part Ten demonstrated that practices through which people of many traditions seek the holy by means of signs are religious acts maintained within living faiths, and each merits equal recognition and liberty.

Reverence

Holy things merit reverence because of the One they serve and the people who cherish them. The honor accorded to an icon extends to the one it represents, as it does for every sacramental object and holy instrument. Ridiculing a blessed deck kept for prayer is an affront to the prayers of those who keep it, just as ridiculing a rosary is an affront to the prayers offered with it.

Reverence has practical implications. Hospitals, prisons, and other institutions should accommodate a blessed deck used in prayer, just as they

accommodate rosaries, prayer rugs, and sacred texts. Public discourse and the media should not portray the practice as entertainment or fraud without regard to how it is observed. Honest criticism is welcome; ridicule of a religious practice is different. Civil regulation should not license, tax, or police a practice maintained as worship and pastoral care as though it were entertainment or fortune-telling. Within the churches, charity governs, in accordance with Paul's counsel to "outdo one another in showing honor" (Romans 12:10), enabling churches to disagree about the practice while continuing to speak of it, and of those who observe it, with respect. For those who observe the practice, reverence begins with their own conduct. A blessed deck is to be kept honorably, used only for prayer, and never treated as a game; the same reverence is due to the holy instruments of every other faith.

May a church prohibit the practice among its clergy and members? It may. A church's freedom to order its own life operates in both directions, and any church may establish its own rule and prohibit the sacred table within its communion. That freedom is not at issue here. The request is that the same freedom be extended to communions that have adopted the practice, that civil authorities remain neutral among churches, and that ministers who observe the practice be judged according to the rules of their own communion rather than those of another.

PART TWELVE
Giving an account

The First Letter of Peter asks believers to be prepared to give an account of the hope within them, "yet do it with gentleness and reverence" (1 Peter 3:15–16). Those entrusted with the sacred table are regularly asked to provide such an account by bishops and church boards, chaplaincy committees and institutional review panels, family members and friends, journalists, and, on occasion, civil authorities. The following are the questions most frequently asked, each accompanied by a brief answer drawn from the preceding sections. These responses are intended to be offered gently and reverently, as the apostle instructs, never defensively or with disdain for the person asking, whose concern is generally well-intentioned and often admirable.

Isn't this just fortune-telling? No. Fortune-telling is a commercial practice founded on the claim that the future is fixed and can be read and sold. The sacred table is a rite of prayer founded on the conviction, shared by every Christian tradition, that there is no fixed fate to be read and that the future is shaped by how we respond to God. It claims to foretell nothing, sells no certainty, and promises no outcome; it is judged by its fruits, never by the accuracy of a forecast. It attends to the present: what a person is carrying, what God may be inviting, and what step they might take. It is no more fortune-telling than confession, baptism, anointing with oil, or the Eucharist, nor is it any more a form of entertainment. It belongs alongside these practices as a rite of prayer ordered to grace.

Doesn't Scripture forbid divination?

Scripture prohibits certain practices that have been translated using the term "divination," while permitting others. It records with approval the Urim and Thummim, the casting of lots before the Lord, God speaking through dreams, Gideon's fleece, the Magi's star, and the apostles' casting of lots to select Matthias (Exodus 28:30; Proverbs 16:33; Judges 6:36–40; Matthew 2:1–12; Acts 1:24–26). Deuteronomy 18 prohibits an entire religious system founded on fear and bargaining with powers other than God, placing child sacrifice at the top of the list; it contrasts such practices with the living God, who speaks through the prophets (Deuteronomy 18:9–15). Scripture also condemns profiting from others, as in the case of the enslaved girl in Philippi, and teaching a fixed fate that leaves no room for repentance. The sacred table turns to God alone, bargains with no one, exploits no one, and teaches that the

future remains open. It therefore stands on the side of what Scripture approves.

Isn't the tarot associated with other spiritual movements?

The images were painted in fifteenth-century Italy, drawing on the Church's own visual tradition: the virtues, the Pope and the Emperor, the Wheel of Fortune, Death, the Last Judgment, and the world made whole around a figure positioned as painters placed Christ in majesty. The cards were Christian for three centuries before the esoteric revival of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries adopted them. That revival forms part of the cards' history and carried forward a serious search for hidden wisdom. Many people today continue to use the cards within other spiritual paths, a practice this work respects. Christian use takes nothing from theirs. It receives back into Christian prayer images that grew up in the church's own house, and clergy and lay Christians in several traditions have taken it up in recent decades.

Doesn't it open a door to the demonic?

This is a serious concern, and the danger it identifies is real. Scripture teaches that powers oppose God, and that Christ won victory over them on the cross through undivided love. However, spiritual harm does not arise from a material object. It arises through the human heart—through fear, pride, the desire to control, unforgiveness, or despair. The misuse of the Bible can open the same door.

The sacred table preserves disciplines that guard the heart. Every session is grounded in Christ, and every spirit is tested in his name (1 John 4:1–3). Nothing is summoned, bargained with, or bound, and each session concludes with prayer. When someone fears spiritual oppression, the minister treats the concern with the utmost seriousness and offers no definitive judgment. No one is told that a demon has attached itself to them, nor is anyone who is frightened told that nothing is there. The minister discerns over time, attending to the person's body, mind, history, relationships, and spirit; offers prayer for protection in Christ without claiming to know the cause; helps the person stand firm in Christ; welcomes medical and psychological care as complementary support; and offers prayer for freedom when requested. When rightly observed, the table is a place where hidden bondage can be recognized and brought into the light.

Only Christ can institute a sacrament. How can this be one?

Many churches teach that Christ alone instituted the principal sacraments, including baptism and the Eucharist, and that teaching is honored here. A

sacramental, however, is by definition instituted by the church, and every church that observes sacramentals has instituted them: holy water, blessed oil, the rosary, the prayer rope, and the blessing of homes and fields. The sacred table is a sacramental in this sense. It is also a sacrament in the older and broader sense in which the church used the word for a thousand years: one of the many holy signs through which God gives grace, a sense in which all creation is sacramental. In this sense, Christ instituted the church's entire sacramental life by taking flesh, giving the Spirit, and sending the church forth with authority to order its life. The sacred table should be recognized as both a sacrament and a sacramental, taking its place alongside the church's other means of grace.

No church approves this. Why should anyone accept it?

*Sacramentals have always begun locally, in a particular place and ministry, before receiving the attention of any wider body. The blessing of throats, Brigid's rush cross, the prayer cloths of Pentecostal churches, and countless other holy practices began in this way. The approval a sacramental requires is that of the communion in which i*t is used, and the sacred table is kept under that authority. Most church bodies today warn against divination, and what their warnings aim at is fortune-telling, fatalism, the exploitation of the anxious, and the desire for power over the future. The sacred table shares every one of those concerns and is built to meet them. Read by their own reasons, those warnings stand with it against fortune-telling.

Why not just pray, or read the Bible?

The sacred table is a way of praying, and it is often joined to reading Scripture. It replaces neither. It belongs with lectio divina, the Stations of the Cross, the rosary, and prayer before an icon, practices in which the church has long prayed through images and series of images. Many people receive God more readily through image than through words, and some carry sorrows or wounds they have no words for. Some have been hurt by religious language and cannot bear to hear it. Some stand outside the churches and would never open a Bible, yet they will sit at a table where an image is laid down. For all of them the table is a door grace comes through. The church has never thought it needed only one way to pray.

Why accept money for it?

Scripture holds two things together: "You received without payment; give without payment" (Matthew 10:8), and "the laborer deserves to be paid"

(Luke 10:7). Grace, insight, and any word God gives for another person can never be sold, because they belong to God. What can honestly be supported is the minister's time, preparation, attention, and care, as every church supports its clergy. At the sacred table any fee is stated in advance, is for time and care and never for an outcome or a guarantee, is reduced or waived for anyone who cannot pay, and is never charged for help in a crisis. No one is ever told they are cursed or in danger so that they can be sold a remedy. The earliest Christian teaching on prophecy said a prophet who asks money for the word itself is false, and the sacred table keeps that rule.

Is this simply psychology?

The sacred table operates with genuine power at the intersection of the psychological and the spiritual—in image, memory, emotion, and meaning. Psychology can describe some aspects of what happens there, and that description is welcome. At least one licensed psychotherapist uses the same images with clients in an entirely secular manner, as do others. They make no predictions, maintain that no card has a single correct interpretation, and emphasize that the cards are not therapy and are not a substitute for it. The sacred table welcomes that work and affirms each of those limits. What it adds is prayer: the same images, received within the church's prayer.[206] *Grace, however, has always worked through the human mind, not around it. A practice whose effects can be partly described in psychological terms is no more merely psychological than prayer, conversion, or the Eucharist, whose effects can also be partly described. The church has always held that grace perfects nature rather than destroying it. At the sacred table, God meets people through the fullness of who they are.*

Is it legal, and is it protected?

In the United States, the First Amendment protects both the free exercise of religion and freedom of speech. Courts may not determine whether a religious belief is true, but only whether it is sincerely held. A church determines its own rites and ministers. A law targeting a religious practice is presumed invalid. Counsel offered in conversation is protected speech. Accordingly, a practice conducted as worship and pastoral care, under ordination and within a church's own rite, is protected as religious expression and should not be regulated as fortune-telling, a commercial category to which it does not belong. Most states also exempt clergy who provide counsel within their ministry from counselor-licensing requirements, although the conditions vary. Anyone with a specific legal question should consult an attorney.

Why should anyone treat it with reverence?

Because it is holy to those who keep it, and holy things are owed reverence for the sake of the One they serve and the people who cherish them. The church has long taught that the honor given to an icon passes to the one it represents. Ridiculing a blessed deck kept for prayer ridicules the prayers of those who keep it, just as ridiculing a rosary ridicules the prayers said upon it. The same reverence is owed to the sacred signs of every faith, and those who keep the sacred table owe the same reverence to others in turn. "In everything do to others as you would have them do to you" (Matthew 7:12).

Who is responsible for what is said?

Three kinds of speech occur at the table, and they are kept distinct. What a person sees in an image belongs to that person. The minister's questions open doors and claim no authority. If the minister believes a word may have been given in the Spirit, they say so plainly, offer it tentatively, and leave it to the person to test, retain, or set aside. No consequential decision rests on such a word alone. The minister is responsible for how the session is conducted, while the person remains free in every choice they make.

What if I want to stop, or I'm unhappy with how it went?

You may stop at any time, decline the images, or decline the blessing, without any adverse consequences. If anything troubles you, you may inform the minister or raise the matter with the independent contact designated by the communion to address concerns—a person distinct from the minister's own spiritual director or confessor. Concerns are heard and addressed.

What if someone is harmed?

In that case, the practice has failed and must be corrected. The sacred table invites evaluation by its fruits (Matthew 7:16), and fear, dependence, manipulation, and exploitation are harmful fruits. For this reason, the practice is governed by safeguards appropriate to it: consent; the priority of addressing any crisis; recognition of the limits of the minister's competence; confidentiality; firm boundaries; discouragement of dependence; an honest offering; thorough discernment; and accountability to a spiritual director, supervisor, or confessor, as well as to the communion the minister serves. Anyone may raise a concern about a minister with the independent contact designated by the communion, and that concern must be heard and addressed. Those who violate the rules are held accountable. The same principle applies to

every ministry in the church. The possibility of misuse has never been a reason for the church to relinquish its sacred practices, but rather a reason to safeguard them with greater reverence.

These responses will not persuade everyone, nor are they intended to win arguments. They enable those who uphold the sacred table to explain honestly and gently what they do and why, while allowing those who question the practice to see it as it is. The apostle's instruction concludes with the hope that those who speak against Christians may be put to shame by their good conduct in Christ (1 Peter 3:16). Ultimately, the sacred table seeks to be known by its effects on the lives it touches people consoled in grief, freed from fear, reconciled with those they have wronged, turned toward God, and sent forth to love. It possesses genuine spiritual power to transform lives and hearts and to bring the soul into communion with God; this is the account it most wishes to offer.

Conclusion

The question was whether tarot, received into Christian prayer, can serve as a means of grace and, if so, what follows. The answer has emerged from within the mystical and creation-centered stream of the Christian tradition, in language that the wider church and people of other faiths can recognize.

God gives grace through visible signs, from the first page of Scripture to the Incarnation, and creation is the first and broadest of them. The church has never agreed on the number of means of grace. Each church orders its own rites and institutes its own sacramentals, and no single communion can determine how grace may be received in another. Within that freedom, tarot, when blessed and received into prayer, is a true sacrament and a useful sacramental. In its blessed matter and ordered rite, it bears every mark by which the churches recognize a sacramental. In the encounter within that rite, when the word of God is joined to the image and grace is given and received in faith, it is a sacrament in the older and broader sense. It does not create a union with God that was not already present. Rather, it helps a person recognize the Christ who is their deepest nature and sends them back into the world to give that love a human form.

In what way is it useful? It is useful in the same way that the church's many means of grace have always been useful. No church is bound to retain every one of them—lectio divina, holy water, or the anointing of the sick—yet, where they are retained, they offer help that reaches people particularly well. The table serves in the same way. Where it is retained, it reaches people whom other means often miss: those who receive God more readily through images than through argument, those carrying wounds for which they have no words, and those who stand outside the churches. No church is being asked to adopt it, and no Christian must receive it in order to be saved. It asks only to be recognized for what it is: a sacrament and a sacramental.

Its word is prophetic, spoken for the present so that people may turn. Nineveh was spared because its people heeded the prophecy against it, and a prophecy that succeeds by not coming true is the clearest indication that prophecy does not announce a fixed future. Every Christian tradition rejects a fixed fate, as do the world's great religious traditions. The practice turns to God alone, bargains with no one, exploits no one, and keeps the future open. Fortune-telling does the opposite. The churches' historic objections were directed at paid oracles, divided loyalty, fatalism, reliance on other powers, gambling, idolatry, and claims to unveil a fixed future; this practice addresses

each of those concerns. Its images are Christian in origin, and Christians have sought God's direction through lots, the opened book, and drawn texts throughout the church's history.

The practice takes spiritual warfare seriously, locates the first battlefield in the heart, and confronts every power opposed to God with Christ's authority and without fear. It offers no verdict about anyone's affliction. Its fruit is evident in personal prayer and spiritual direction, in grief and reconciliation, in the healing of memory, among people outside the churches, and in Chaplaincy and catechesis. It belongs to a broad family of practices across faiths in which people seek the holy through sacred signs, and each practice is deserving of reverence. Because it is a form of religious expression, it ought to be recognized and protected under the liberty of conscience and freedom of religion, as every sacrament and sacramental is. In the United States, the First Amendment provides strong grounds for its protection, and the same liberty extends to the sacred signs of every faith.

What is asked

Of the churches, this work asks that they judge the practice by what it is and by its fruits, rather than by what it has been mistaken for. It asks them to distinguish it from fortune-telling, as Scripture distinguishes seeking God from turning away from God, and not to call it demonic without the full discernment the church requires before making any such judgment. Where they do not receive it, it asks them to speak of the practice, and of those who keep it, with charity, and to defend the religious liberty of those who keep it as they would wish their own sacraments to be defended. It also asks them to continue the conversation, offering an account and receiving correction where it is due.

Of civil authorities, it asks recognition of the practice, when maintained as worship and pastoral care, as a sacramental practice and an exercise of religion, protected as religious expression under the liberty of conscience and freedom of religion. Statutes written against fortune-telling should not be applied to a practice that sells no forecast and promises no outcome. The confidences of those who receive it deserve the same protection afforded to confidences in pastoral care, and hospitals, prisons, and other institutions should accommodate blessed decks used in prayer, as they accommodate other religious items. Between churches that receive the practice and those that do not, the state should remain neutral.

Those who keep the practice are asked to do so honestly, promising no outcome and selling no certainty. They should offer wisdom and accompaniment, and state plainly what they do not know. They should exercise discernment with care, testing every word spoken in Christ's name and attending to the whole person. They should offer the care of souls in prayer, welcoming medical and psychological care whenever healing requires it. They should remain accountable to a rule, a soul friend, and a communion. They should also maintain reverence, using a blessed deck only for prayer and honoring the holy things of every other faith.

Those who come to the table are asked to do so freely and to leave freely; to test what they receive by its fruits—love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control (Galatians 5:22–23); to seek every kind of care they need and dismiss none; and to retain ownership of their decisions, making them before God.

A final word

Underlying the whole argument are a few convictions shared by the entire church, and one held as distinctive by this stream. God is not silent. God made the world good and meets human Beings through the things God has made. Grace is not scarce. The future is held open in love. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it (John 1:5). As this stream holds in hope, the end will be like the beginning, when God is all in all (1 Corinthians 15:28). On the basis of these convictions, this work has argued that a deck of blessed images, arranged in prayer, can provide a setting in which God and a human life meet. The sacred table possesses genuine spiritual power to transform lives and hearts and to bring the soul into communion with the divine. It is offered to the churches, civil authorities, and all who preserve or seek it for their consideration, in the hope that it will be known by its fruits.

Appendices

Appendix A: The practice as kept

A theological argument is stronger when the practice it defends can be shown to be kept as described. What follows records the ecclesial, liturgical, ethical, and pastoral framework within which the author, an ordained priest, keeps the practice this work defends, so that the work's claims can be checked against an existing ministry. Churches and civil authorities may both reasonably ask whether a practice is genuinely religious, or only a private habit or a commercial service, and Part Eleven shows that the question has been decisive in at least one court.

The practice is kept within an ordained ministry. The author was ordained in 2005, first within the Reformed, Congregational, and Presbyterian traditions and later in Anglican and Catholic lines, and has exercised priestly ministry since 2009, with further ordination for interfaith and interspiritual ministry after that. Formation began in evangelical and Pentecostal churches, the Assemblies of God among them, where prophecy, words of knowledge, and prayer for healing are part of ordinary congregational life. That formation bears directly on the argument, since the sacred table is one of the settings in which such gifts are exercised and tested. Three permissions are kept distinct. Any baptized person may pray with a blessed deck in personal devotion. Accompanying others calls for formation and commissioning. Formal ministry is exercised under ordination and the rule of a communion.

Its theology is the mystical and creation-centered stream described in Part Two, rooted in the whole church of East and West, attentive to the contemplative and inner tradition, drawing especially on the saints of Ireland and Britain, and holding that God has left no people without a witness. The author's theological writings, listed under Related Works by the Author, set that tradition out at length, so the practice sits inside a developed theology and was not taken up apart from one. The author practices spiritual direction and companionship and is a member of Spiritual Directors International and the Spiritual Care Association, whose ethical guidelines govern their members' practice.

There are written rites. A deck is blessed before use with a lit candle, the reading of Scripture, water, the sign of the cross in the name of the Trinity, and prayer for the right use of the images, and from then on it is reserved for prayer. Each session opens with grounding in Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit and closes with thanksgiving, blessing, and the return of the person to

their own freedom before God. A single card may also be used within the daily office at morning and evening. Appendix C gives the short forms.

A written ethic of flourishing governs the practice, and each session is examined against it. So does a discipline of discernment that refuses hasty conclusions, a rule of honest offering that forbids selling certainty or protection and provides for reduced or free sessions and free help in a crisis, and a rule of life for those who keep the table, with accountability to a supervisor, confessor, or soul friend. Appendix B puts that governance in canonical form.

Sessions are offered in person, by telephone, and online. In the author's experience, most of the people who come return over time, within an ongoing relationship of accompaniment. Many of them want insight and conversation in the presence of God much more than any account of future events, and the cards serve mainly as a way into that conversation. Requests for a definite prediction, a plain yes or no about what will happen, are the ones the practice is least able to satisfy, because it will not represent the future as fixed. When timing comes up, an impression may be offered, as an impression and never as a determination, and the person is free to set it aside. A reading is understood as seeing one part of a path before it is traveled, knowing that the way one travels may change the path.

This record answers four questions. The practice is sincere, kept in prayer under ordination over many years. It is ordered, following written rites, a written ethic, and a rule of honest offering, and it answers to a community of practice. It is pastoral, offered for the care of souls and judged by the fruits of care. And it is religious in every respect, growing from Scripture, from the devotional history of the church, from a priestly vocation, and from a developed theology. It is one of the ways that faith is lived, not a private pursuit kept alongside it.

Appendix B: A model rule for the sacred table

This rule is offered as a model for any autonomous sacramental communion that wishes to institute the sacred table as a sacramental of its common life. A communion may adopt it, adapt it, or set it aside. The author keeps the practice recorded in Appendix A under this rule as a personal rule of life.

Article 1. Institution. The use of the tarot in prayer at a blessed table, for discernment, examen, prophetic ministry, spiritual direction and companionship, and pastoral care, is received by this communion as a sacramental of its common life and, in the event of encounter within the rite, as a sacrament in the wide sense of the word.

Article 2. Purpose. The sacred table is ordered to metanoia, healing, theosis, love of neighbor, and communion with God. It shall not be used to forecast a fixed future, to satisfy curiosity, to gain advantage over another, or to control any person.

Article 3. Matter. A deck becomes the matter of this sacramental when it has been blessed according to the rite of this communion and set apart for prayer. A blessed deck shall be kept with honor and used for no other purpose.

Article 4. Ministers. The sacred table may be kept for others by priests of this communion and by baptized persons commissioned by it after formation. Any baptized person may use a blessed deck in personal prayer.

Article 5. Formation. Those commissioned to keep the table for others shall be formed in prayer, Scripture, the discernment of spirits, the prophetic tradition, the ethics of pastoral care, and the safeguards of this rule, and they shall know the limits of their competence.

Article 6. Rite. Every session shall open with grounding in Christ and prayer for the Holy Spirit, and shall close with thanksgiving, blessing, and the return of the person to their own freedom before God. Every word received shall be tested in Christ's name.

Article 7. Freedom. No one shall be pressed to receive the sacred table. The cards shall be used only when the person freely chooses them, and the person may end the session at any moment. The person shall speak first, and the minister shall offer reflections as questions. The minister shall keep distinct the person's own associations, the minister's pastoral questions, and any word offered as given in the Spirit, and shall say which is which.

Article 8. The prophetic word. Any word that seems to be given in the Spirit shall be named as such and offered humbly and tentatively, and the person may leave it unconfirmed, return to it later, or set it aside. Words about what may come shall be offered only as descriptions of where a present path

seems to lead, or as impressions held lightly, so that the person may choose freely. No decision of consequence shall rest on such a word without ordinary evidence and independent counsel. No minister shall pronounce doom over any person, name the time of anyone's death, or claim from the images knowledge of another person's hidden conduct or intentions, or of any hidden fact.

Article 9. Prohibitions. No minister of the sacred table shall claim to see a fixed future or present an impression as a certainty; tell any person that they are cursed or in spiritual danger; use the images to establish whether abuse occurred, to recover an uncertain memory, or to infer what another person has done; give any verdict of spiritual oppression or possession; advise any person to stop a medical or psychological treatment; use the table to frighten, flatter, or control; or enter into a romantic or sexual relationship with anyone they accompany.

Article 10. Care and safety. The minister offers the care of souls in prayer and companionship, and welcomes medical and psychological care as partners whenever a person's healing requires them. If a person is at risk of harming themselves or another, the session shall stop and the minister shall help them reach emergency help at once. Where the law requires a report to protect a child or a vulnerable adult, the minister shall make it. For sessions by telephone or online, the minister shall know where the person is and how to reach local emergency help there. A minor shall come only with a parent's or guardian's consent, the young person's own assent, and under this communion's safeguarding arrangements.

Article 11. Discernment of spiritual darkness. When a person fears spiritual oppression, the minister shall pray with them in Christ's name, take the experience with complete seriousness, hand down no verdict, and discern over time, with prayer and shared judgment, attending to body, health, mind, history, relationships, and spirit. The person shall be encouraged to seek medical and psychological care as well. No minister shall tell any person that a spirit has attached itself to them, and no minister shall tell a frightened person that nothing is there. The images shall never be used to identify a cause. Where image work heightens fear, it shall be set aside, and where fear intensifies, the session shall end gently, the minister shall make sure the person is not left alone, and shall help them reach further pastoral care and, where needed, medical or psychological care. Prayer for protection in Christ may be offered to anyone who is afraid, as prayer and not as confirmation of any cause: helping the person name the harm, take every thought captive to Christ, stand in their identity in Christ, seal the boundaries of their life in prayer, and fill the swept

house with God. Prayer for freedom shall be offered where the person asks for it, by those authorized for it, as prayer and not as a pronouncement. Any ministry of deliverance shall be kept only by those authorized for it, under the oversight of the communion. Nothing shall be summoned, bargained with, or bound.

Article 12. Confidence. What is spoken at the table shall be held in sacred trust within the limits that safety and the law set, and those limits shall be told to the person at the beginning. The minister shall also tell the person what, if anything, is written down afterward, where any notes are kept, and what may be shared with a supervisor.

Article 13. Offering. Any fee shall be stated in advance. It shall be for time, attention, and care, and never for an outcome, a guarantee, or protection. A reduced or free session shall be available to anyone who cannot pay, and help in a crisis shall be given without charge.

Article 14. Dependence. A person who returns repeatedly with the same anxious question shall be helped to rest in God and not in the cards or the minister. The minister may pause the use of cards, agree on limits with the person, keep accompanying them without cards, and refer them for care beyond the minister's role.

Article 15. Accountability. Each minister shall examine their practice regularly, bring it to a soul friend, supervisor, or confessor, and answer to this communion for the way the table is kept. Each communion shall name an independent contact for concerns, separate from the minister's soul friend or confessor, with a written process and the authority to act, including interim restrictions and review. Any person may bring a concern through that contact, and it shall be heard and answered.

Article 16. Reverence. Ministers of the sacred table shall speak of the holy instruments of every faith with respect, and of churches that do not receive this practice with charity.

Appendix C: A short rite and a short form for a session

The deck is blessed before its first use. The one leading asks whether there is peace, and those present answer that there is peace. A candle is lit with the words of the Gospel: "The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it" (John 1:5). The words of the Pastoral Epistle are read: "everything created by God is good, and nothing is to be rejected, provided it is received with thanksgiving; for it is sanctified by God's word and by prayer" (1 Timothy 4:4–5). The minister touches water and traces the sign of the cross over the deck in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, and then prays:

> Holy God, giver of every good gift,
> set apart these images for your service,
> and bless all who pray with them.
> Let them serve truth and never fear,
> wisdom and never control,
> the healing of all who come and the glory of your name.
> Through Christ our Lord. Amen.

The deck is then wrapped or boxed and kept apart for prayer from that day on.

A session at the sacred table follows a simple shape. Before anything else, the minister says plainly what the session is and is not, explains the limits of confidentiality, and tells the person they may decline the images, stop at any time, and decline the closing blessing. The minister welcomes the person and asks how they are arriving, in body and in heart. A candle is lit, there is a time of silence, and the session is opened in Christ with a brief prayer for the guidance of the Holy Spirit and for the protection of God's holy angels. The minister listens to what the person is carrying and hears the whole of it before anything else is done. The minister then asks whether it would help to look at what the person carries through an image, or whether they would prefer to keep talking, and follows their lead.

If the person chooses an image, one to three cards are drawn, the person speaks first about what they see, and the minister offers reflections only as questions. The session gathers what has emerged by asking what stands out, what God's invitation might be, and what one step the person might take, and the person chooses a small act of embodiment to carry into their life: a truthful conversation, rest, a request for help, a prayer, or the repair of an injury. An image has served its purpose when it can be put down and the person given the attention one would give to Christ. The session closes with thanksgiving and, if it is welcome, a blessing, sending the person back to their own freedom before

God, and the candle is put out. Afterward the minister prays for the person by name and notes anything to bring to their soul friend or supervisor.

Appendix D: Glossary

Anamchara. An Irish word for a soul friend: one who accompanies another in the life of the spirit.

Archetype. A primordial image or pattern in the human depth; in its older Christian use, the image of God in the human person.

Autonomous sacramental communion. A church that celebrates the sacraments, keeps orders in a recognized line, and governs itself without being subject to a larger jurisdiction.

Babaláwo. A priest of Ifá among the Yoruba and in the traditions of the diaspora.

Discernment. The gift of perceiving what is of God in a situation, a decision, or a spirit, and what is not.

Divination. In its root sense, the seeking of the divine will through signs. The work uses the word sparingly and only in this sense.

Divine spark. The flame of God's own life that burns in every person and, in its own way, in every being; it can be obscured but never put out.

Ecclesial and mystical registers. The two senses of the word sacrament: the principal ordered rites of a church, and the older and wider sense in which any holy sign through which God gives grace is a sacrament.

Examen. A prayerful review of one's day, heart, or practice before God.

Fate. The belief that the course of a human life is fixed in advance and cannot be changed by prayer or repentance. The Christian tradition rejects it.

Fortune-telling. The claim to forecast fixed future events in a person's life, ordinarily for payment, apart from any prayer, rite, community, or accountable ethic.

Holy instrument. Any material object set apart for worship or prayer in any faith.

Honest offering. Support given for a minister's time, attention, and care, never for an outcome or a guarantee.

Icon. A sacred image honored in prayer, the honor given to which passes to the one it represents.

Istikhara. In Islam, a prayer for guidance before a decision, asking God for the good and for contentment with it.

Lectio divina. The prayerful reading of Scripture in four movements: reading, meditation, prayer, and contemplation.

Logismoi. In the desert tradition, the thoughts that assail the soul and seek to draw it away from God.

Major and Minor Arcana. The twenty-two trumps of the tarot, which show the soul's road, and the fifty-six cards of the four suits, which show the ordinary matter of a life.

Means of grace. Any ordinance, rite, or practice through which God ordinarily gives grace to those who receive it in faith.

Metanoia. A change of mind, usually translated repentance: a turning from the illusion of separation toward the truth that the person was never apart from God.

Nepsis. Watchfulness: the practice of attending to the thoughts as they arise and returning the attention to God.

Panentheism. The view that all things are in God and God is in all things, while God remains more than all things together; distinct from pantheism, which identifies God with the world.

Prophecy. Speech given by God through a human messenger for upbuilding, encouragement, and consolation, which speaks of the future only conditionally.

Providence. God's loving guidance and sustaining of all things, in which human freedom and divine grace remain real.

Psychospiritual. The region of human life in which the psychological and the spiritual meet: image, memory, emotion, meaning, and the sense of self before God.

Sacrament. In the ecclesial register, a principal rite of a church; in the mystical register, any holy sign through which God gives grace to those who receive it in faith.

Sacramental. A holy sign that a church sets apart by its prayer to dispose the faithful to receive grace and to sanctify the occasions of life.

Sacred table. This work's name for the use of the tarot in prayer at a blessed table, opened and closed in Christ, for discernment, examen, prophetic ministry, spiritual direction, and pastoral care.

Spiritual direction and companionship. The practice of accompanying another person in attending to God's presence and action in their life.

Theosis. Participation in the divine nature (2 Peter 1:4); the goal of the Christian life in the Eastern tradition.

Threefold reading. The early Celtic way of reading Scripture, grounded, symbolic, and imaginative, held together and done in community; in this work, also a discipline for reading the images.

Trionfi. The triumphs: the picture cards added to Italian playing cards in the 1440s, from which the English word trump comes.

Urim and Thummim. The sacred lots carried by the high priest of Israel in the breastplate of judgment (Exodus 28:30).

Visio divina. Prayerful gazing at sacred images, after the pattern of lectio divina.

Appendix E: Twenty-two Gospel meditations with the major images

What follows is an optional curriculum of contemplative prayer. It makes no claim to decode the cards or to know what their first painters intended. Images differ between historic and modern decks, and Strength and Justice trade places in common arrangements. The Gospel comes first, then the image. Each image can be read in the threefold way described in Part Four: first what is really in the picture and in the life of the one who prays, then what it signifies in the light of Christ, and then what prayer and imagination make of it. The twenty-two meditations follow the pattern of the Gospel story itself, so that walking through the images is a way of walking that story as one's own. Each meditation offers a passage of Scripture, a question for prayer, and a possible act of embodiment, a small way of giving love a human form. No image supplies a diagnosis, an oracle, or a command, and a person may set any meditation aside or receive something entirely different from it.

A simple way to pray each meditation is to read the passage aloud, sit with the image for a few minutes in silence, name what it stirs, notice any consolation or resistance, and choose one modest step. The whole sequence is not required, and a single image may be enough for a season. The companion never declares what a card "really means." At a later sitting it is good to return to the step taken after an earlier meditation, and, if another person was affected, to consider what they actually said or needed, since their experience may change how the image is understood.

0. The Fool: call and trust

Mark 1:16–20. The first disciples leave their nets without being handed a map. The Fool opens a conversation about beginnings, wonder, and the vulnerability of setting out. Where am I being invited to take a responsible step into the unknown, and where might I be confusing faith with recklessness? Embodiment here might be a small act of courage, joined to honest preparation.

I. The Magician: gifts in service

1 Corinthians 12:4–7. Every gift of the Spirit is given for the common good. The question the image raises is what gifts I have and whom they serve, and whether I am tempted to make myself indispensable. Offer an ordinary gift quietly, without display. It can help to stay with a single detail of the image until attention settles, and to notice afterward whether something first overlooked has changed how the gift might serve another.

II. The High Priestess: silence and discernment

Luke 2:19. Mary treasures and ponders what she cannot yet explain. The image asks for reverent restraint before the urge to announce an answer. What deserves to be held in silence until understanding ripens? Perhaps the step is simply to listen, or to write, or to accept that a question is not ready to be resolved.

III. The Empress: fruitfulness and care

Luke 13:6–9. The gardener asks for one more year to dig around the fig tree and feed it. Growth requires cultivation, patience, and the conditions that let life flourish, and nurture belongs to every person whatever their gender. What part of my life needs care more than pressure? Rest might be the step, or practical tenderness toward someone vulnerable.

IV. The Emperor: authority under judgment

Mark 10:42–45. Jesus contrasts the rulers who lord it over others with the one who came to serve. The image asks how power is being held in a family, an institution, or a ministry. Where do I need a boundary, and where do I need to let go of control? A decision made in the open, or authority shared, could be the act that follows.

V. The Hierophant: tradition and living wisdom

Mark 2:27. The sabbath was made for humankind. Religious forms sustain life, and their purpose is never exhausted by their rules. The image brings gratitude for teachers and traditions together with honest discernment of their limits. Which tradition has fed me, and where must I ask whether its practice still serves love? Study and conversation may be enough for now, and patient reform after them.

VI. The Lovers: covenant and integrity

John 13:34–35. Love is known by the care it gives and the truth it can bear. The image raises questions of faithfulness, consent, friendship, and divided loyalties. What would a loving and honest choice require now? It may call for a difficult conversation, a boundary, or an act of faithful care.

VII. The Chariot: resolve without domination

Philippians 3:12–14. Purpose is good, and the wish to prevail can harden into the need to control. The image shows the difference between steadfastness and

aggression. What deserves my effort, and whose freedom must I protect while I pursue it? Act with discipline, and do not turn other people into obstacles on the way.

VIII or XI. Strength: courage and gentleness

Matthew 11:28–30. The one who is gentle and humble in heart gives rest. Not all strength is force, and the image speaks of the patient courage that meets fear without becoming cruel. What in me needs gentle attention, and what situation asks for steadiness? Ask for help, perhaps, or set a calm boundary, or refuse humiliation without handing it back.

IX. The Hermit: solitude that returns to love

Mark 1:35–39. Jesus withdraws before dawn to pray and then goes on to the neighboring towns. The image asks whether solitude is restoring presence or becoming avoidance. The Hermit's lantern is the spark within. Solitude is where it is fanned, so that there is light to carry back to others. What silence do I need, and toward whom am I being called back? Take a time of undistracted prayer, then come back to an ordinary act of service.

X. The Wheel of Fortune: change and humility

James 4:13–15. Plans are fragile, and we are to say, "If the Lord wishes." The wheel does not forecast a reversal. It asks for humility about what can and cannot be controlled. Where have I mistaken a passing advantage for security, or misfortune for rejection by God? Make a more honest plan, one with room for uncertainty and for mutual care.

XI or VIII. Justice: truth and repair

Micah 6:8. Justice is more than an inner sense of balance. The image asks whose voice is missing, what harm has been done, and what repair is possible. Where do I need to tell the truth, restore what was taken, or resist unfairness? Restitution may be owed, or advocacy, or a boundary that protects someone vulnerable.

XII. The Hanged Man: the limits of control

Philippians 2:5–11. In the light of Christ's self-emptying, the suspended figure can invite a different way of seeing. It must never be used to sanctify abuse or to demand that anyone submit to harm, since the cross never sanctifies suffering.

What assumption might I release, and what protection must I keep? The step may be patient reconsideration joined to responsible action.

XIII. Death: loss and the paschal pattern

John 12:24. Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone. Some endings are chosen and others are suffered. The image does not forecast anyone's death. It opens an honest conversation about mourning, change, and what cannot be restored. What must I grieve before I hurry to spiritualize it? Name the loss. Look for companionship. Make room for new life without denying the old.

XIV. Temperance: patient integration

2 Corinthians 5:18–19. God has given us the ministry of reconciliation. Reconciliation cannot be rushed or produced by sentiment, and the image supports the slow work of bringing divided parts of a life into honest relation. What needs integration without concealment? Speak in measure, repair with care, and do not demand instant forgiveness. A second sitting may pair the image with Martha and Mary (Luke 10:38–42), giving each sister enough attention to honor both the labor that made the visit possible and the freedom to listen that every household needs.

XV. The Devil: bondage and liberation

Galatians 5:1. For freedom Christ has set us free. The image can symbolize habits, shame, compulsion, or domination that constrict a life, and in many modern decks the chains hang loose enough to lift off. It is never a verdict that a person is afflicted by a spirit. What keeps me captive, and what help is available? Tell someone trustworthy. Where treatment is needed, seek it, and where a situation is coercive, leave it.

XVI. The Tower: collapse and truth

Matthew 7:24–27. The house built on sand falls. A falling tower may stand for the painful failure of a belief, an institution, or a self-image. It does not mean that disaster was planned by God or deserved by anyone. What was built on fear, and what remains worthy of trust? First safety, then the truth, then rebuilding together with others.

XVII. The Star: hope without denial

Romans 5:3–5. Hope does not disappoint, because God's love has been poured into our hearts. Hope is neither a forecast nor a demand that sorrow end quickly, and the image can hold a small light in exhaustion. What might nourish a lasting hope in this season? Accept care, or take up again a practice that sustains you, or help someone else find shelter.

XVIII. The Moon: uncertainty and fear

1 Corinthians 13:12. For now we see in a mirror, dimly. There are seasons when perception is partial and imagination magnifies uncertainty. The image asks me to distinguish what I know from what I fear. What is actually established, and what may be fear giving itself a convincing shape? Gather information and rest, and put off any decision that cannot be undone.

XIX. The Sun: joy and shared life

John 1:4–5. The life was the light of all people, and the darkness did not overcome it. Light is given and not possessed, and the image opens the way to gratitude, delight, and openness to the goodness of creation, while leaving room for those whose present is painful. Where has joy survived unnoticed? Give thanks, and do something that makes joy easier for someone else to find.

XX. Judgement: awakening and accountability

Romans 13:11–12. It is now the moment to wake from sleep. To awaken is to hear an invitation to live differently and to answer for what one has done, and it is never an escape from responsibility. What must come into the light, and what past action calls for repair? Confession may come next, or restitution, or simply the courage to begin again.

XXI. The World: communion and consummation

Colossians 1:15–20; 1 Corinthians 15:28. In Christ all things hold together, and God will be all in all. The image can be contemplated in the light of the reconciliation of all creation in Christ, which this work holds as a conviction; that reading is a theological interpretation and not a claim about what the card first meant. Where does the recognition that I belong ask me to act more justly? Stand with someone excluded, care for the earth, or make one practical act of reconciliation.

Return

The sequence returns to its beginning. One who has prayed with the World does not outgrow the Fool's humility or the Hermit's patience. Recognition of union with God is not a finished achievement. It is a gift received again in each new circumstance of life, so that Christ, already the deepest nature of the one who prays, may take form a little more fully. These meditations succeed only so far as they deepen honest seeing, freedom, and love.

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Notes

[1]For Christian treatments of the tarot as a path of prayer and spiritual formation, see the works of an Episcopal priest on the Bible and the tarot, a Christian guide to the major images as lessons of Christ's holy fool, a deck and commentary drawn from the Hebrew Scriptures, and a study of the cards as mandalas of spiritual transformation, listed in the Works Cited under Stafford, Wagner, Loeb, and Irwin; and the anonymous twentieth-century Catholic meditations on the twenty-two trumps, listed under Tomberg.

[2]Augustine, *The City of God* 10.5. The Anglican catechism of 1662 gives the formula as "an outward and visible sign of an inward and spiritual grace."

[3]*The Gospel of Philip* 67,9–27, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007); compare the translation in *The Gnostic Bible*, ed. Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer (Boston: Shambhala, 2003): "Truth didn't come into the world naked but in types and images."

[4]The Roman Catholic definition is given in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras. 1667–1670. The Orthodox, Anglican, and Lutheran churches keep many of the same blessings and holy objects under other names, and the Pentecostal and Holiness churches keep anointing oil and prayer cloths (Acts 19:11–12).

[5]John Wesley, Sermon 16, "The Means of Grace" (1746), which names prayer, the searching of the Scriptures, and the Lord's Supper; the Methodist *Large Minutes* add fasting and Christian conference among the "instituted" means of grace.

[6]Philip M. Peek, ed., *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Barbara Tedlock, "Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation," *Folklore* 112, no. 2 (2001): 189–197.

[7]Maximus the Confessor, *Ambigua* 10.

[8]John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon*.

[9]Columbanus, *Instructiones* 1.

[10]The word was coined in the nineteenth century by the German philosopher Karl Christian Friedrich Krause; the vision it names is much older, as Paul's "in him we live and move and have our being" (Acts 17:28) shows.

[11]On original blessing as the starting point of Christian theology, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Fox and Shroyer.

[12]*The Secret Book of John*, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007), section titled "The Imprisonment of Humanity" (II 20,28–21,28).

[13]J. Philip Newell, *Christ of the Celts: The Healing of Creation* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008), chs. 1–2, drawing on the Secret Book of John and on the nineteenth-century Scottish teacher Alexander Scott.

[14]*The Nature of the Rulers* (*Hypostasis of the Archons*) and *On the Origin of the World*, in *The Nag Hammadi Scriptures*, ed. Marvin Meyer (New York: HarperOne, 2007).

[15]The *Gospel of Nicodemus* (*Descent into Hades*), in *The Apocryphal New Testament*, ed. J. K. Elliott (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993).

[16]Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5.1.1; Gregory of Nyssa, *Catechetical Oration* 22–26. For the later shift see Anselm, *Cur Deus Homo* (1098), and for the history of the older view, Gustaf Aulén, *Christus Victor* (1931). The contrast between rescue from wrath and rescue from bondage is drawn in Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (1905), ch. 7.

[17]For contemporary accounts of the true self hidden in God and the false self that must be released, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Merton and Rohr.

[18]Martin Luther, *Heidelberg Disputation* (1518), Thesis 28.

[19]Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54; see also Irenaeus, *Against Heresies* 5, preface.

[20]Hans Boersma, *Heavenly Participation: The Weaving of a Sacramental Tapestry* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2011).

[21]Daniel E. Loeb, *Wisdom's Chariot Tarot* guidebook, on the "Chymical Wedding" of the soul with the Spirit of Wisdom; Gospel of Philip 67.

[22]Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (1905), ch. 14.

[23]Athanasius, *On the Incarnation* 54; see also 2 Corinthians 8:9.

[24]C. G. Jung, *Aion: Researches into the Phenomenology of the Self*, Collected Works 9.II, para. 70: "Christ exemplifies the archetype of the self."

[25]Harriette Augusta Curtiss and F. Homer Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe* (1915).

[26]Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (1905), ch. 6, "The Mystic Christ."

[27]The prayer known as St. Patrick's Breastplate (*Lorica*).

[28]Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh, 1900).

[29]J. Philip Newell, *Listening for the Heartbeat of God: A Celtic Spirituality* (New York: Paulist Press, 1997).

[30]Ron Ferguson, *Chasing the Wild Goose: The Story of the Iona Community* (Glasgow: Wild Goose Publications, 1998), 17.

[31]Adomnán, *Life of St. Columba*, Books 1 and 3.

[32]Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2002), Letter I, The Magician. For an older account of esoteric Christianity, written in the language of the lesser and greater mysteries, see Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (1905).

[33]For introductions to the inner or esoteric tradition of Christianity, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Smoley and Bourgeault.

[34]Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

[35]Origen, *On First Principles* 1.6.2.

[36]Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (1905), ch. 14, "Revelation."

[37]Alan Watts, *Behold the Spirit: A Study in the Necessity of Mystical Religion* (New York: Pantheon, 1947), introduction.

[38]On symbols as participating in the reality they signify, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Tillich and Eliade.

[39]Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 13.

[40]Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* 2.

[41]Edward Schillebeeckx, *Christ the Sacrament of the Encounter with God* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1963); Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium* 1.

[42]John of Damascus, *On the Divine Images* 1.16.

[43]The Church of England, *The Book of Common Prayer* (1662), the Catechism. The reading of the formula as joining a pictorial sign to a real conveyance of grace follows Annie Besant, *Esoteric Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries* (1905), ch. 12.

[44]Gospel of Philip 67, in Willis Barnstone and Marvin Meyer, eds., *The Gnostic Bible* (2003).

[45]Augustine, *On the Catechizing of the Uninstructed* 26.50; see also his *Letter* 55 and *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 80.3.

[46]Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Ecclesiastical Hierarchy*, chs. 2–7.

[47]Hugh of St. Victor, *On the Sacraments of the Christian Faith*, Book 1, Part 9, and Book 2, Part 9.

[48]Peter Lombard, *Sentences*, Book 4, Distinction 2.

[49]Council of Trent, Session 7 (1547), Canons on the Sacraments in General, canon 1.

[50]Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. (London: Penguin, 1993), chapter on the sacraments.

[51]ʿAbdishoʿ bar Brikha, *The Pearl* (*Marganitha*), Part 4.

[52]*Apology of the Augsburg Confession*, Article 13 (7).

[53]*Articles of Religion* (1571), Article 25.

[54]*Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), ch. 27.1.

[55]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1257.

[56]Alexander Schmemann, *For the Life of the World: Sacraments and Orthodoxy* (Crestwood, NY: St. Vladimir's Seminary Press, 1973), ch. 1.

[57]David Brown, *God and Enchantment of Place: Reclaiming Human Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

[58]*Articles of Religion* (1571), Article 34; *Augsburg Confession* (1530), Article 7.

[59]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras. 1667–1668; Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 79.

[60]Second Council of Nicaea (787), Definition; Basil the Great, *On the Holy Spirit* 18.45.

[61]Celtic Catholic Church, *A View of the Catechism of the Celtic Catholic Church* (Diocese of the Isles of St. Brendan, 2026), q. 45.

[62]*The Convergent Prayer Book, according to the Use of the Convergent Christian Communion*, "Blessing a Rosary" and the short formulary.

[63]In the Byzantine Divine Liturgy the Gospel book is carried in the Little Entrance and kissed by clergy and people; on the veneration of the Gospel book see also the *General Instruction of the Roman Missal*, nos. 120, 133, and 175.

[64]*Second Helvetic Confession* (1566), ch. 1: "The preaching of the Word of God is the Word of God."

[65]On the Moravian Daily Watchwords (*Losungen*), published since 1731, with the Old Testament texts drawn by lot at Herrnhut, see the publications of the Moravian Church listed in the Works Cited.

[66]Daniel E. Loeb, *Tarot of the Most High: Reflections of the Bible*, "About This Deck"; and his *Wisdom's Chariot Tarot* guidebook, "About this deck."

[67]Augustine, *Tractates on the Gospel of John* 80.3.

[68]Council of Florence, *Decree for the Armenians* (1439): each sacrament is completed by things as its matter, words as its form, and the person of the minister acting with the intention of doing what the church does.

[69]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras. 1128 and 1670.

[70]Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission according to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. David Heimann (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), ch. 6.

[71]Daniel E. Loeb, *Wisdom's Chariot Tarot* guidebook, "How to Use This Book."

[72]Meister Eckhart, Sermon 60 in the Walshe numbering, on the light in the soul that is "uncreated and uncreatable"; see also the selected writings listed in the Works Cited.

[73]Pseudo-Dionysius, *The Celestial Hierarchy* 2.

[74][Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, Letter I (the Magician) on arcana as "ferments" or "enzymes"; Letter IV (the Emperor) on the "spark" of God in every being; Letter XI (Force) on the symbol that reveals the Word.

[75][Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot*, Letter XXI (the Fool).

[76]C. G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," Collected Works 9.I, para. 5.

[77]C. G. Jung, "On the Nature of the Psyche," Collected Works 8, para. 388.

[78]C. G. Jung, "Freud and Jung: Contrasts," Collected Works 4, para. 781; and Jung, *Man and His Symbols*.

[79]C. G. Jung, *Answer to Job*, Collected Works 11, paras. 656–658 and 693.

[80]Guigo II, *The Ladder of Monks* (*Scala Claustralium*), c. 1150.

[81]On the devotional emblem tradition, see Herman Hugo, *Pia Desideria* (Antwerp, 1624), and Francis Quarles, *Emblemes* (London, 1635).

[82]Gregory the Great, *Letter to Serenus, Bishop of Marseille* (600), *Registrum Epistularum* 11.10.

[83]Richard Rohr, *Yes, And . . . : Daily Meditations* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2013), 27.

[84]C. G. Jung, "The Transcendent Function" (1916), in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Collected Works 8; and *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Collected Works 9.I. The record of Jung's own sixteen-year dialogue with images was published as *The Red Book: Liber Novus*, ed. Sonu Shamdasani (New York: W. W. Norton, 2009); see also Sanford L. Drob, *Reading the Red Book* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Books, 2012).

[85]Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* (1548), nos. 47 and 121–126.

[86]Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2002), Letter I, The Magician.

[87]Henry Corbin, "Mundus Imaginalis, or the Imaginary and the Imaginal" (1964); Cynthia Bourgeault, *Eye of the Heart: A Spiritual Journey into the Imaginal Realm* (Boulder: Shambhala, 2020).

[88]C. G. Jung, "Archetypes of the Collective Unconscious," in *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*, Collected Works 9.I, paras. 81–82.

[89]C. G. Jung, *Psychological Types*, Collected Works 6, paras. 815–816.

[90]Stephan A. Hoeller, *The Gnostic Jung and the Seven Sermons to the Dead* (Wheaton: Quest Books, 1982), on active imagination.

[91]John Scottus Eriugena, *Periphyseon* 4 (749C), as quoted in Kenneth McIntosh, *The Peacock's Tail Feathers: Reading the Bible the Celtic Way* (2019), whose Part II sets out the threefold Celtic reading described here.

[92]John Cassian, *Conferences* 14.8, where Jerusalem is read at once as a city, the church, the soul, and the heavenly city.

[93]Viktor E. Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1959; first published 1946).

[94]Arthur Rosengarten, *Tarot and Psychology: Spectrums of Possibility* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2000).

[95]Harold G. Koenig, Dana E. King, and Verna Benner Carson, *Handbook of Religion and Health*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012); Kenneth I. Pargament, *Spiritually Integrated Psychotherapy: Understanding and Addressing the Sacred* (New York: Guilford Press, 2007).

[96]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 1, a. 8, ad 2.

[97]Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot*, Letter VI, The Lover.

[98]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 1128.

[99]For a contemporary account of the fated, probable, and possible futures and the role of the prophet in moving from the probable to the possible, see the work listed in the Works Cited under ÓLaoire.

[100]Adomnán, *Life of St. Columba*, Book 1.

[101]On Hildegard's visions and their reception at the Synod of Trier, see Hildegard of Bingen, *Scivias*, trans. Columba Hart and Jane Bishop (New York: Paulist Press, 1990), and the introduction to that edition.

[102]Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Long Text, ch. 27.

[103]The trade does not always hold this claim consistently. A recent handbook written for telephone practitioners concedes that "free will and countless variables influence outcomes": Christina Quick, *The Psychic Hotline Handbook* (2025), 23.

[104]C. G. Jung, "Foreword to the *I Ching*" (1950), in *Psychology and Religion: West and East*, Collected Works 11, paras. 1000 and 1018.

[105]Augustine, *The City of God* 5.1–10; Gregory of Nyssa, *Against Fate*.

[106]John Calvin, *Warning against Judicial Astrology* (1549).

[107]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 5; Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* I, q. 14, a. 13.

[108]On synergy in Orthodox theology, see Timothy (Kallistos) Ware, *The Orthodox Church*, new ed. (London: Penguin, 1993).

[109]*Westminster Confession of Faith* (1646), ch. 3 and ch. 5.

[110]On open and relational accounts of the future, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Cobb and Griffin, and Whitehead.

[111]Alvin Plantinga, *God, Freedom, and Evil* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), part 1.

[112]*Unetaneh Tokef*, recited on Rosh Hashanah and Yom Kippur. Translations differ on whether the three acts cancel the decree or its severity; see the discussion in the works listed under the Works Cited entry for the prayer.

[113]Mishnah, *Avot* 3:15.

[114]Jami' at-Tirmidhi, Book of Divine Decree, hadith 2139. The grading of this hadith is disputed among scholars.

[115]On karma as conditioned and changeable, see the work listed in the Works Cited under Thich Nhat Hanh.

[116]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 95, aa. 1–8.

[117]Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot*, Letter III, The Empress.

[118]C. G. Jung, "Synchronicity: An Acausal Connecting Principle" (1952), in *The Structure and Dynamics of the Psyche*, Collected Works 8.

[119]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, paras. 2115–2116.

[120]Michael Dummett, *The Game of Tarot: From Ferrara to Salt Lake City* (London: Duckworth, 1980); Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of the Occult Tarot* (London: Duckworth, 1996); Helen Farley, *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009).

[121]Petrarch, *I Trionfi*; see also Gertrude Moakley, *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti-Sforza Family* (New York: New York Public Library, 1966).

[122]Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Book 2.

[123]Robert M. Place, *The Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination* (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2005).

[124]Decker, Depaulis, and Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards*; Farley, *A Cultural History of Tarot*.

[125]Harriette Augusta Curtiss and F. Homer Curtiss, *The Key to the Universe* (1915) and *The Key of Destiny* (1919), ch. on the number thirteen.

[126]Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot*, Letter X, The Wheel of Fortune.

[127]Anonymous [Valentin Tomberg], *Meditations on the Tarot: A Journey into Christian Hermeticism*, trans. Robert Powell (New York: Tarcher/Penguin, 2002), with an afterword by Hans Urs von Balthasar.

[128]See the works listed in the Works Cited under Stafford, Wagner, Loeb, Irwin, Kalin, and Townsend.

[129]AnneMarie Luijendijk, *Forbidden Oracles? The Gospel of the Lots of Mary* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014).

[130]William E. Klingshirn, "Defining the Sortes Sanctorum: Gibbon, Du Cange, and Early Christian Lot Divination," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 10, no. 1 (2002): 77–130.

[131]Augustine, *Confessions* 8.12.29.

[132]Bonaventure, *The Major Legend of St. Francis* 3.3.

[133]On the Moravian lot and the Daily Watchwords (*Losungen*), published since 1731, see the publications of the Moravian Church listed in the Works Cited.

[134]John Wesley, *Journal*, March 1739; and his letters defending the Moravian use of the lot.

[135]On promise boxes, see the late nineteenth-century examples held in the Yale Center for British Art and described in the Bridwell Library exhibition on devotional objects, listed in the Works Cited.

[136]Council of Ancyra (314), canon 24.

[137]Council of Vannes (c. 465); see Klingshirn, "Defining the Sortes Sanctorum."

[138]Augustine, *The City of God* 5.1–10; *Confessions* 4.3.

[139]Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae* II–II, q. 95, aa. 1–8.

[140]On Bernardino of Siena's preaching against games of chance, see Dummett, *The Game of Tarot*.

[141]Elaine Pagels, *The Origin of Satan* (New York: Random House, 1995).

[142]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 2116.

[143]*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, para. 2115.

[144]Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* 79.

[145]*Code of Canon Law* (1983), canon 1167 §1.

[146]On the false self and the true self hidden with Christ in God, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Merton and Rohr.

[147]On dualistic thinking and the contemplative mind, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Rohr.

[148]On presence and the release of identification with thought, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Tolle.

[149]Evagrius Ponticus, *Praktikos*; *The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

[150]*The Philokalia*, trans. G. E. H. Palmer, Philip Sherrard, and Kallistos Ware, 4 vols. (London: Faber and Faber, 1979–1995).

[151]John Cassian, *The Conferences*, trans. Boniface Ramsey (New York: Newman Press, 1997), Conference 1.19–22 and Conference 2.9.

[152]Athanasius, *Life of Antony* 35; Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission according to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. David Heimann (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), ch. 8.

[153]On common cognitive distortions and their bearing on reading the images, see the podcast hosted by the psychotherapist Shannon Knight, *The Tarot Diagnosis*.

[154]See the works listed in the Works Cited under Nouwen.

[155]Meister Eckhart, "On Detachment" and the German sermons, in *Selected Writings*, trans. Oliver Davies (London: Penguin, 1994); Reiner Schürmann, *Wandering Joy: Meister Eckhart's Mystical Philosophy* (Great Barrington: Lindisfarne Books, 2001); Mark S. Burrows and Jon M. Sweeney, *Meister Eckhart's Book of Secrets: Meditations on Letting Go and Finding True Freedom* (Charlottesville: Hampton Roads, 2019).

[156]*The Cloud of Unknowing*, chs. 3–7.

[157]See the works listed in the Works Cited under Rohr.

[158]C. G. Jung, *Aion*, Collected Works 9.II, ch. 2.

[159]On the golden shadow, and on reading each major image for both its dark and its golden side, see the psychotherapist Shannon Knight, *Dark Shadow, Golden Shadow* (2025).

[160]Krasimir Kalin, *Illuminating the Path Within: Shadow Work with the Biblical Tarot* (2025), chs. 11–12.

[161]On the symbolism of the major images, see the works listed in the Works Cited under Pollack and Place.

[162]*The Sayings of the Desert Fathers*, trans. Benedicta Ward (Kalamazoo: Cistercian Publications, 1975).

[163]The prayer known as St. Patrick's Breastplate (*Lorica*).

[164]Alexander Carmichael, *Carmina Gadelica: Hymns and Incantations* (Edinburgh, 1900).

[165]Lee Irwin, *Gnostic Tarot: Mandalas for Spiritual Transformation* (1998), on spreads laid out as mandalas.

[166]Adomnán, *Life of St. Columba*, Book 2.

[167]Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission according to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. David Heimann (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), chs. 7–8, citing Basil, *Against Eunomius* 3.1, and Origen, *On First Principles* 2.10.7; Annie Besant, *Esoteric*

Christianity, or The Lesser Mysteries (1905), ch. 10, "Prayer."

[168]See the works listed in the Works Cited under Balthasar (*Dare We Hope*) and Hart.

[169]Julian of Norwich, *Revelations of Divine Love*, Long Text, ch. 27.

[170]Celtic forms of the daily office commonly keep four hours of prayer, at morning, noon, evening, and before sleep; see the Celtic breviary listed in the Works Cited under Kaiser, preface.

[171]*RB 1980: The Rule of St. Benedict in English*, ed. Timothy Fry (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1981), chs. 8–20.

[172]Brother Lawrence of the Resurrection, *The Practice of the Presence of God*.

[173]On the ethics of spiritual direction, see the guidelines for ethical conduct published by Spiritual Directors International, listed in the Works Cited.

[174]Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises* (1548), nos. 313–336.

[175]Dennis Klass, Phyllis R. Silverman, and Steven L. Nickman, eds., *Continuing Bonds: New Understandings of Grief* (Washington, DC: Taylor and Francis, 1996).

[176]Ignatius of Loyola, *Spiritual Exercises*, nos. 169–189.

[177]William R. Miller and Stephen Rollnick, *Motivational Interviewing*, 3rd ed. (2013). The psychotherapist Shannon Knight pairs motivational interviewing with the suit of Wands in her podcast, *The Tarot Diagnosis*.

[178]Judith Lewis Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1992).

[179]On a safe-enough container for shadow work, a pace the nervous system can bear, and the risks of forced confrontation, see the work of the psychotherapist Shannon Knight, especially *The Tarot Diagnosis* and *Dark Shadow, Golden Shadow*; and Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, on safety as the first stage of recovery.

[180]Paul R. Smith, *Integral Christianity: The Spirit's Call to Evolve* (St. Paul: Paragon House, 2011), ch. 15.

[181]George G. Hunter III, *The Celtic Way of Evangelism*, 10th anniversary ed. (Nashville: Abingdon, 2010).

[182]Gregory the Great, *Letter to Serenus, Bishop of Marseille* (600), *Registrum Epistularum* 11.10.

[183]Daniel E. Loeb, *Tarot of the Most High: Reflections of the Bible*, Table One.

[184]The image of tarot as a personal echo chamber, and the advice that seeking help need not mean giving up the cards, come from the psychotherapists Shannon Knight and Luna Hammond in conversation, "Therapeutic Tarot with The Tarot Diagnosis," Writual Planner, 2023. Compare the false prophet in Shepherd of Hermas, Mandate 11, who answers according to the hearer's own desires.

[185]UNESCO, "Ifa Divination System," proclaimed 2005 and inscribed in 2008 on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity.

[186]Confucius, *Analects* 7.17.

[187]Jamgön Mipham, *Mo: Tibetan Divination System*, trans. Jay Goldberg (Ithaca, NY: Snow Lion, 1990).

[188]*Sahih al-Bukhari*, Book of Invocations, hadith 6382.

[189]John Michael Greer, *The Druidry Handbook: Spiritual Practice Rooted in the Living Earth* (San Francisco: Weiser Books, 2006).

[190]Tacitus, *Germania* 10.

[191]Philip M. Peek, ed., *African Divination Systems: Ways of Knowing* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Barbara Tedlock, "Divination as a Way of Knowing: Embodiment, Visualisation, Narrative, and Interpretation," *Folklore* 112, no. 2 (2001): 189–197.

[192]Jean Daniélou, *The Angels and Their Mission according to the Fathers of the Church*, trans. David Heimann (Westminster, MD: Newman Press, 1957), ch. 2, citing Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* 6.17, and Origen.

[193]Justin Martyr, *Second Apology* 13; Second Vatican Council, *Nostra Aetate* 2.

[194]Tertullian, *To Scapula* 2.

[195]Lactantius, *Divine Institutes* 5.19–20.

[196]Second Vatican Council, *Dignitatis Humanae* 2.

[197]*United States v. Ballard*, 322 U.S. 78 (1944).

[198]*Thomas v. Review Board*, 450 U.S. 707 (1981).

[199]*Church of the Lukumi Babalu Aye v. City of Hialeah*, 508 U.S. 520 (1993).

[200]*Kedroff v. St. Nicholas Cathedral*, 344 U.S. 94 (1952); *Hosanna-Tabor Evangelical Lutheran Church and School v. EEOC*, 565 U.S. 171 (2012).

[201]*Catholic Charities Bureau v. Wisconsin Labor and Industry Review Commission*, 605 U.S. 238 (2025).

[202]*Chiles v. Salazar*, 607 U.S. ___, No. 24-539 (Mar. 31, 2026).

[203]In particular, how *Chiles v. Salazar* bears on the speech analysis in *Moore-King v. County of Chesterfield*, 708 F.3d 560 (4th Cir. 2013), is a question for counsel.

[204]*Spiritual Psychic Science Church of Truth v. City of Azusa*, 39 Cal. 3d 501 (1985), decided under the California Constitution; *Argello v. City of Lincoln*, 143 F.3d 1152 (8th Cir. 1998); *Nefedro v. Montgomery County*, 414 Md. 585 (2010).

[205]*Moore-King v. County of Chesterfield*, 708 F.3d 560 (4th Cir. 2013).

[206]See the website and podcast of the psychotherapist Shannon Knight, *The Tarot Diagnosis*.