

Contexts of Altar Flowers

A Contribution to a Theology in Construction

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Flowers are placed on the altar in many Christian churches. However, while many other items on the altar have given rise to a vast body of theological research, this is not the case with altar flowers. In this article the author makes a constructive contribution to the theology of altar flowers and looks at the contexts in which altar flowers are imagined and how these can help to illustrate theological elements. Two initial contexts for altar flowers are assumed: the liturgical and the extra-liturgical, suggesting that altar flowers hold particular meanings both for those who know the Christian story, and equally for those who do not. It is suggested that a role which seems merely decorative is not that after all, as deeper Christian meanings can be offered in both contexts. Moreover, altar flowers as objects of nature have the capacity to speak to new groups of people on urgent contemporary themes. Finally, it is suggested that altar flowers may also bridge a divide between the secular and sacred. Apart from contributing to the construction of a theology of altar flowers, a deeper understanding of the intersections of aesthetics, faith and reason is sought.

Introduction

Flowers are placed on the altar in many Christian churches around the world. Depending on the location, they may come in a pot, some cut fresh, others in plastic. Their colours vary, and their size and shape, too. Rather than being accidental, there seems to be a certain determined role for the flowers on the altar. However, while

many of the other items on the altar, such as the crucifix, Bible, candle and objects connected to the eucharist have given rise to a vast body of theological research this is not the case with altar flowers, as is pointed out by Heidi Jokinen and Anni Maria Laato (2020). Altar flowers are visible but ignored and existing literature says very little about them.

Altar flowers may be mentioned in handbooks for janitors (Byskata et al. 2012), as also briefly in books about church praxis (Bringéus 2005; Kilström 1977). Or they may not be mentioned at all, as is the case in the liturgical handbook of Stephen Burns (2006, 4), even when presenting liturgy as a multi-sensory enterprise of which scents are an elementary part. Similarly, in his book about Christian ritual and the visual sense structure, Staale Sinding-Larsen (1984, 88–90) does not mention flowers, even in the chapter on the altar. Then again altar flowers may be mentioned in fields remote from theology, such as conservation (Leckström 2015).

The lack of theological research into altar flowers is noteworthy. It is interesting that a holy place, the altar, hosts items without anyone really knowing why. It is equally interesting that there is a widely lived practice of altar flowers without a thorough

account of the meaning and purpose of the practice. Altar flowers call for research that can address these gaps in a theologically relevant manner. This article contributes to a theology of altar flowers.

A fundamental assumption made in this article is that the absence of a *written* theology of altar flowers does not mean that a theology does not exist. That flowers are considered such a vital part of altars virtually everywhere in the Christian world suggests that there is at least a tacit appreciation of their role and purpose. A theology of altar flowers is hinted at in the institutionalized praxis of them, although not verbalized in theological literature.

While a full theology of altar flowers is warranted, this article will contribute to an endeavour to be continued at a later stage. In this article the contexts in which altar flowers are imagined is considered, and how these can help to illustrate theological elements in their use. Cues are offered for the construction of a theology of altar

flowers, as well as new perspectives on the intersections of aesthetics, faith and reason.

With the aim of contributing to a construction or reconstruction of a theology of altar flowers, a recourse to methods of constructive theology is promising. Jason Wyman (2017, 162, 170) argues that constructive theology allows a person to figure out where they stand, what landmarks are worth visiting and what pitfalls to avoid. Further, he claims, constructive theology does not shy away from any traditional theological *loci*, as they are important because they provide entries into theologizing, suggesting ways to continue the conversation. By using traditional doctrines, constructive theology accesses the very things that need to be deconstructed but also reconstructed today.

To elaborate on Wyman (2017, xxx), this article, as a sort of constructive theology, pays attention to theological traditions as well as modern approaches in order to formulate useful but potentially also fallible

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Flowers accompany other objects on the altar: crucifix, Bible and candles. St. Catherine's Church, Turku.

contributions to a relevant theology. The endeavour is somewhat unorthodox compared to a traditional theological analysis of what a given literature says of a particular theme. Because of the lack of explicit literature on altar flowers, this article works in an inductive manner. I will focus on more generic literature and point to relevant and feasible openings.

Contributing to a written theology by capturing some existing theologies witnesses to the nature of theology in the first place. Theology has, as described by Francis Schüssler Fiorenza (2011, 3), an inherently scholarly side to it, striving for historical exactitude, conceptual rigour, systematic consistency and interpretative clarity. In addition, theology is related to faith, and to individual, social and institutional expressions of it. This makes theology a thoroughly pluralistic endeavour, although the disciplinary rigour has often been emphasized.

The ambiguity inherent in the objective of this article, namely both to construct and to reconstruct a theology of altar flowers, is evident from the start. The article moves between two levels, addressing both sides of the theology: both what could be and what already is. The article starts with a presentation of the contexts in which altar flowers can be imagined and then goes on to analyse these contexts in more detail. The final part ties these two contexts together to find a common ground between the different contexts explored. The article will problematize, through altar flowers, a prevalent tendency for dualistic thinking.

The contexts of altar flowers

Flowers are found in a wealth of forms in the Christian tradition and in churches worldwide. The Bible is filled with references to flowers. Many hymns have been inspired by biblical floral symbolism. Flowers are

depicted in paintings and textiles, and as decorations as part of the church space in general. These various flowers have been the object of a wealth of studies: biblical flowers (e.g. Bockmuehl and Stroumsa 2010; Hughes and McKenna 2014; Worcester 2009; Leland 2015; Suomela, Louhivuori and Järvinen 1996); funeral flowers (Drury 1994; Reintoft Christensen 2023); different types of flowers (Bergström 1958); the particular interest individuals over the centuries of Christianity have taken in flowers (Leng 2003), just to mention a few. While many of these accounts serve as important sources for a study of altar flowers, these flowers are not just any flowers.

The altar has a very special place and role in a church (Doe 2017; Sadler 2018). It is the altar itself that becomes an important cue for the meanings of the flowers placed on it. In general terms the particular role of the altar is to serve the liturgy and the eucharist (Sinding-Larsen 1984, 88–89). This sets up an expectation regarding the objects on the altar. Sinding-Larsen explains in *Iconography and Ritual. A Study of Analytical Perspectives* (1984, 15) that the function of iconography connected with the altar is to illustrate dogmatic and doctrinal concepts expressed in the liturgy and described in liturgical, theological and ecclesiological tradition.

Similarly, I assume that items placed on the altar play a role in liturgy, and that liturgy is a key context for establishing the meaning of altar flowers. I therefore start by examining the liturgical role of the flowers. The focus is on the Protestant liturgy of today and its origins in the Catholic liturgy.

However, the role of altar flowers cannot be restricted to the liturgical sphere only. When the service is over, when the objects of the eucharist have been taken away and candles put out, the altar flowers remain. This suggests an additional context for altar

flowers: one outside the formal liturgy. This context is particularly interesting, but challenging. While an analysis of the liturgical context can be based on a rich body of research concerning the liturgy, the extra-liturgical context opens for many previously undiscovered perspectives.

In this article, the extra-liturgical context is approached through the perspective of those who see the flowers on the altar: both those with a Christian pre-understanding and those with none whatsoever. Therefore a decorative role for the flowers is assumed in this extra-liturgical context. But there may be more to it than mere decoration. In an article regarding the symbolism of the cross in church, Lisa Nyberg (1998, 335) talks about a strategic visualization in order to advance the mission of the church. Therefore this section of the article puts forward the intriguing relationship of aesthetics, faith and reason.

The liturgical context of altar flowers

Liturgy can be roughly described as a regulated system of texts to be read or sung and a limited number of actions (Sinding-Larsen 1984, 15). The degree to which liturgy is and can be regulated has shifted over time.

Traditionally, liturgical elements have had a role and meaning that are determined and carefully crafted. Stephen Burns (2006, 5) proposes that such a rigid approach to liturgy arose during the medieval period, with an attempt to impose conformity. Restricting what was said to carefully formulated words on a page was about nurturing orthodoxy and preserving good doctrine. Such attempts at standardizing liturgy have been problematized in recent research but also in church praxis over recent decades.

Moving away from a very rigid description, the service of worship can also be described as a participation in a moment

of holiness in which the word of God is spoken, and human attitudes such as adoration, thanksgiving and proclamation, included (Hössjer Sundman 2012, 53; see also Burns 2006, 161). This description reveals unspoken elements of the liturgy, indicating that not everything can be captured in words. A diversification of liturgy is taking place. It is today understood as much more than mere text. For example Burns (2006, 3–4) underlines the multi-sensory dimension of liturgy. The audible voices such as reading of texts, footsteps, pouring of water and wine, singing; visual dimensions such as the human face, the cross; and senses such as the taste of bread and wine, the touch of other people, and fragrance, even of coffee to denote the hospitality after the liturgy, are all considered to play a part in liturgy.¹

Liturgy has also evolved in terms of its social aspects and participatory nature. For Gunnar Weman (2012, 147–48), a core element in all worship, all liturgy, is the active participation of the people of God, which shows, for example in Sweden, where a determined emphasis was put on everyone's participation, at the cost of the leadership role of the clergy in the liturgy as part of the liturgical renewal movements of the 1960s and 1970s.

Against the background of the key elements of liturgy, both old and new, a theology of altar flowers find several possible footings. While distinguishing such roles a categorization put forward by Sinding-Larsen

1 The sensual dimension of liturgy is just one way to embody worship. Movements, postures and moving of the scriptures also have a role to play. John O'Malley (2013, 261) writes about the role of the human face in liturgy. See also Laato (2023, 224–26) for different aspects that come into play when investigating liturgy.

(1984, 29) is helpful. He differentiates between formal and auxiliary functions of liturgical objects and then again between liturgical and para-liturgical ceremonies, where these functions can be played out.

A formal function within the formal liturgy is evoked when a particular use for a liturgical object has been formally prescribed. Such functions for different objects are very few. The altar and the chalice have such formal functions, but the imagery they may bear as embellishment not so much (Sinding-Larsen 1984, 29). It is unlikely that altar flowers have any prescribed, formal functions in Protestant liturgy. The liturgy can be celebrated without flowers on the altar.

However, Sinding-Larsen (1984, 30) also mentions auxiliary functions for liturgical imagery within the formal liturgy. These include serving as illustrations during teaching; the focusing of one's attention upon and illustrating the main and subordinate topics in the liturgy while this is being celebrated; holding the attention or distracting in a positive way the bored congregation; and focusing private devotion in a non-liturgical sense.

These functions seem to reflect the purposes mentioned for altar flowers in some of the available literature (e.g. Byskata et al. 2012, 67–68; Kilström 1977, 57–58). They accord flowers specified roles as part of the liturgical year. By determining what flowers, which colour and even which type of flowers are to be put out for each Sunday, practical manuals seem to assume that altar flowers can enhance the meanings of the texts and hymns during the service.

Through this auxiliary function altar flowers connect the liturgical year to the cycle of the secular year. This is precisely the role flowers and objects of nature have had in churches for centuries. Eamon Duffy (2022, 11, 14) emphasises the importance

of the seasonal cycle of fast and festival for the medieval liturgy. He explains how the relationship of the Christian calendar to turning-points of the season meant that many observances associated with the religious feast served to articulate instincts and energies which were not solely Christian; thus Eastertime dances and games, with balls and eggs and flowers in many communities, were clearly related to the spring theme of fertility. Through the particular choice of altar flowers there is still today a chance for the congregation to find paradigms and stories to shape their perception of the themes in the liturgy.

An auxiliary function of instruction and illustration can also be found in the ability of flowers to evoke the presence of God. Such notions are fundamental to the Jewish-Christian tradition (Hössjer Sundman 2012, 53). While one of the main *loci* for the presence of God during liturgy is the eucharist (Satz 2007, 36), altar flowers may serve a similar function, too. This is the case in particular when consideration is given to whether the flowers are cut, or even when they are freshly picked by the members of the congregation. In both cases the act may bear witness to sacrifice and transience, by uprooting the flowers from their habitat and bringing them to the altar, to slowly wither.

The role of auxiliary elements in liturgy is important. Intuitively one might reject any auxiliary functions as secondary or of lesser value compared to the formal functions. In fact, the Protestant tradition, in particular during the iconoclastic conflicts, became wary of any auxiliary elements in worship that might distract congregants from concentrating on the life of God (Wandel 2007, 349). Also, modern Christianity and modern culture have emphasized cognitive faculties at the cost of aesthetic and multi-sensory experience



Cut flowers bear witness to sacrifice and transience. Elisabethkirche, Marburg.

(Sigurdson 2023, 70). Auxiliary functions emphasize the relevance of the various elements, including the auxiliary, in liturgy as contributing to the whole.

There is a third category that Sinding-Larsen (1984, 29–30) mentions: formal usages in the sphere of para-liturgical rites and ceremonies. Such ceremonies are often mainly customary, maybe even prescribed only locally; these include the practice of the covering-up of the crucifix and other images for Lent, or the carrying of images in processions. Formal para-liturgical roles for altar flowers, as they are used in churches today, may be discerned. Customary practices have accorded certain types of flowers a specific status in certain celebrations of the liturgical year, for example the customary five red roses on or

near the altar on Good Friday (Byskata et al. 2012, 68).

Altar flowers can also serve to include others than the clergy in liturgy; they are often, for example, the responsibility of the janitors. In some churches and congregations the laity can take part in the arrangement and organization of the flowers, enhancing the intentionally participatory character of liturgy. This liturgical participation through tending to altar flowers gives the laity access to the altar, and hence a connection with the theology of the altar in general.

In their physical, embodied presence flowers are not just accidental supplements on the altar; they bring out key aspects of liturgy. Altar flowers convey important Christian teachings, both explicitly and in a more subtle way during liturgy.

The extra-liturgical context

The extra-liturgical context of altar flowers stems from the liturgical context. The flowers put on the altar to enhance the message of the liturgy stay there after the service, maintaining a temporal continuity. The liturgical meanings of colours and flowers remain after the service has ended, being available as reminders to those with knowledge of these meanings. However, some nuances in meaning are added.

During the service it is expected that most of the congregants are open to the meanings of the liturgy. This is not necessarily the case in the extra-liturgical context. Altar flowers in their extra-liturgical context are visible to anyone visiting the church, including those who are not familiar with Christian traditions. While the church space determines the reception of altar flowers irrespective of the observer knowing anything of the Christian heritage, it is likely that the decorative meanings are enhanced in the extra-liturgical context. They can thus be categorized as

part of the visual imagery of the church. Reflections on visual images in church can offer valuable insights here.

Altar flowers as part of the visual imagery of the church

A decorative role for altar flowers in a pejorative sense may conceivably be assumed to arise, as if a merely decorative purpose lies outside the scope of doctrine within the liturgical context. However, a consideration of the many roles of visual images in the church shows that even a decorative role can entail more profound connotations.

An elementary point of departure for this analysis is that visual imagery is man-made, and that this applies also to the placement of altar flowers: flowers are not found on the altar just by accident – someone has carefully chosen them, maybe for their specific colour or type. Secondly, someone, maybe even a professional florist, has arranged the flowers in a particular way. In addition, as the art historian John Berger (1972, 8–9) explains, all images are man-made in the sense that the way we see things is affected by who and what we are as individuals (see also O'Malley 2013, 275). This is particularly relevant to altar flowers in the extra-liturgical sense. The flowers are there for anyone to see. This accidental reception is one of the reasons why the Christian church has been ambivalent towards man-made images.

The role of visual images has been multi-faceted in the history of Christianity. An immense body of research exists on the topic. The following presentation is based on Lee Palmer Wandel's article 'The Reformation and the Visual Arts' (2007). It captures some key milestones in the Christian tradition, in particular the post-Reformation approach to visual images. It contributes to formulating the roles and meanings of altar flowers.

Wandel (2007, 345–46) explains that the central point of departure for any reflection of Christianity and visual arts is that for Christians, be it Catholic, Orthodox or Protestant, representation has never been only about perspective and proportion. The visual arts have always also been about how God and Christ are present in the physical world. Fundamental then is the idea of incarnation and the conviction that if God has taken on flesh, then material representations of Christ belong on a continuum, where the material could serve to make divinity present. A major question remained of how human hands could have a part in such revelation. The answers varied amongst the different churches.

The permissive attitude of the Catholic Church to the use of visual images was affirmed by the Council of Trent. It stated that images of among others Christ were to be given honour and reverence, not because some divinity lies in them, but because the honour showed to them is referred to the original which they represent (Wandel 2007, 246; see also O'Malley 2013, 243–44, 273; Council of Trent n.d.). This approach was formulated as a response to the Reformed churches' contrary views.

Wandel (2007, 347–49) summarizes the main currents in the Reformed churches' views. According to Jean Calvin any man-made images were considered to reflect human conceptions of God and any devotion to them was idolatrous. Moreover, money put to buying luxury objects, such as jewelled missals, should have been spent on the care of one's neighbour. While Calvin was adamant in his position, to the amazement and shock of many, Martin Luther's view towards images was nonchalant. For Luther images were unimportant, since, because of their materiality, they were not able to either seduce or illuminate the soul.

Wandel (2007, 348, 350) underlines that

it is important to note that the main point for Reformers was the role of visual images in worship. Pictures as such were never considered dangerous. It was never about craftsmanship, aesthetics or proportion. Even after the Reformation, all Christians continued to commission religious art and to produce images with the novel techniques of the period.

For altar flowers, this is an important distinction to make. Although placed on the altar, it seems unlikely that flowers would actually ever be worshipped. To align with Luther, and with the categorization of liturgical functions presented above, to have or not have flowers on the altar is a matter of indifference in terms of proper worship and liturgy. However, flowers on the altar, as part of the visual imagery, could serve other valuable, auxiliary, purposes.

A core traditional role for visual images was didactic. In the Lutheran church after the Reformation images made part of a larger didactic enterprise to serve alongside catechisms to teach the fundamentals of Lutheran doctrine (Wandel 2007, 358; see also Sinding-Larsen 1984, 30).

In a similar fashion, altar flowers in their extra-liturgical context would not be decorative only, or void of any Christian meanings. Instead, one of their core functions may be to lead viewers with all their senses deeper into the Christian story even outside the liturgy. However, in that case it needs to be taken into account that at least in the traditional approach the images served a very particular clientele: those who already had the Christian stories by heart.

Mary Carruthers (2008, 9, 275–76, 281–85) explains that during the Middle Ages visual images were vital for the organization and retention of knowledge and for learning. Images served as memorial hooks and cues and triggered recollection of what the reader already knew. A good example of this

is the tradition of the *Biblia Pauperum*, the paintings on the church walls. Maurus Berve (1969, 7–10, 20) insists that they did not serve as stand-alones but only together with previous knowledge of the Christian stories.

If a didactic role of altar flowers can mainly be assumed if the viewer has some Christian understanding, there must be more to it in the extra-liturgical context. Altar flowers are visible to anyone visiting the church. Hence their meanings must broaden to encompass other meanings, too. One possible such role emerges if we regard flowers precisely as what they are: as objects of nature cut from their natural habitat and taken inside the church, to the altar. Such meanings would be open to anyone, and in such meanings would lie a very particular potential in the contemporary situation.

Altar flowers as objects of nature

Altar flowers may nurture individual spiritualities in an unprecedented way. This applies both to those whose knowledge of Christianity is frail, and to those who are well informed. Nature and its yearly cycle have inspired Christianity since time immemorial.² In recent years, however, a new kind of development has been coming to the fore.

Individuals who don't feel at home in churches or with the Christian institutionalized teachings now regard nature as a central source of spirituality (Salomäki et al. 2021, 159). It is in nature, speechless and

2 It is, of course, not only Christianity that has been inspired by nature and flowers. Flowers play a particular role in many religions; see e.g. McDaniel (2004) for flowers and floral themes in Hinduism; Mathiowetz and Turner (2021) on contemporary native cultures in Mesoamerica and the American South-west; and Herrigel and Suzuki (1960) on Japanese tradition.



Altar flowers may come in a pot, some cut fresh, others in plastic. San Marcello al Corso, Rome.

quiet, that the individual finds a time and place to be spiritually nurtured and comforted. Rachel Wheeler (2022, 4–5) calls this ecospirituality and defines it as a focus on experience in the natural world, considered as sacred. Many feel that their spiritual needs can be satisfied in and through nature better than by reading and studying texts.

Flowers on the altar can support such spiritualities in a way that the more explicitly Christian visuals in a church space could not. Flowers can inspire personal meditation in a non-verbal manner. Anyone looking at them is offered opportunities to ponder some fundamental aspects of what it is to be human in this world but also what it is to be a believer. Flowers on the altar can make the church more accessible as a place for devotion. But they can make a statement in a more articulate way, too.

Climate questions have become more urgent in recent times and the church is not unaffected. Altar flowers can remind people of the fragile state of the world and their personal responsibility in it. Rosemary

Radford Ruether (1992, 205) argues in *Gaia and God* that biblical thought and Christian traditions can provide ample resources for ecological ethics. She reminds us of the thought of God as the creator of a living world and how all forms of life witness to this by their mere existence. There is a difference between the forms they take, but the covenantal relationship forbids this difference from being translated into destructive hostility (Ruether 1992, 207–08, 227).

Altar flowers bring out this kinship between all organisms in another way, too. Ruether (1992, 251–52) notes that like humans, plants live and exist for a season and then die. They all disintegrate into organic matter, entering the cycle of decomposition and recomposition. This kinship between all creatures is universal and spans the ages. Ruether calls for new efforts to make the kinship vivid in our communal and personal devotions. Such efforts can be reflected in the attention needed for the arrangement and display of altar flowers, shown for example in deciding what sort of altar flowers are feasible during the long

winter months in the northern parts of the world, and whether they should be cut every time or planted in a pot for longer durability – such issues are elevated beyond being merely practical questions. In the time of climate change these questions hold an ethical relevance on which churches need to take a position if they wish to appear climate-conscious in their practice.

At the same time the church needs narratives that offer hope for individuals amidst the current times of crisis. These narratives do not need to be altogether new, but may be inspired by and stem from old narratives. In an anthology presenting hermeneutical perspectives on biblical paradise narratives Guy Stroumsa (2010, 2) explains that the social and intellectual vitality of Judaism and Christianity of Late Antiquity conveys narratives of hope wrapped up in the concrete symbol of paradise and origins. In a similar fashion, he argues, the current times call for ways to articulate a viably transcendent hope for the human condition.

Altar flowers can speak to these realities and needs. While witnessing to Christian teachings, to ancient narratives and also to a historical continuity, they may open up opportunities to address individual spiritual needs today. They may help us to re-imagine how the church can be relevant for people today. Through altar flowers, holy space can become more accessible.

Discussion: a third context envisioned

I have queried, in this article, the contexts of altar flowers and how they may illustrate elements of theology. An initial assumption has been that there are two contexts for altar flowers. This idea needs to be refined in light of the discussion above.

After an elaboration of the liturgical and the extra-liturgical contexts, what becomes apparent, however, is that the two contexts

are not mutually exclusive. What has been said of altar flowers in either of the contexts is largely applicable also in the other context. Reflections on creation and nature are relevant both during and outside the services, as are questions relating to the presence of God. Rather than being two systematically separate contexts, the two form a matrix of meanings. This means that altar flowers can have many roles and bear a range of meanings. Many of those are relevant and make sense in the light of Christian teachings and are thus accessible to those with knowledge of the Christian tradition. But many are equally accessible to those with no such knowledge.

The analysis has resulted in a collection of varied, yet at the same time valid perspectives. Moreover, this range of results reveals a relevant point for this article: the matrix of meanings brings about a third role for altar flowers, alongside the liturgical and extra-liturgical contexts: analysing flowers within one or the other context alone is not sufficient to capture their full potential. Something of this role is revealed in the flowers' physical continuum on the altar, from liturgy to the ordinary and back to liturgy. The role is also revealed in the flowers' comparable interpretations both during and outside the liturgy. Flowers are objects of nature both outside the liturgy and during it, and can evoke the same interpretations in both contexts. Thus, they dismantle too rigid a categorization and bridge a divide between two different worlds, the world of celebration and that of the ordinary.

This interchange between the sacred and the secular recalls in an adverse way the dynamics exhibited during the iconoclastic contests in the sixteenth century. Charles Ford (2007, 75) describes how church furnishings being dragged out into the marketplace was the moment of



Nature can be a central source of spirituality and altar flowers can talk to those needs. Chapel of Bengtskär lighthouse, Bengtskär.

sacrilege, of denial and rejection of the sacred, of exposure to the banality of everyday space, to the impertinent attention of passers-by. Thereby, he explains, the existing system of meaning of the furnishings was challenged. They were stripped of their fetish status and revealed just their actual material, wood or fabrics.

In a similar fashion, I suggest, altar flowers are simply any flowers, maybe from a field nearby, but at the same time bearers of particular meanings on the altar, both during and outside the liturgy. Moreover, their meanings change depending on who is looking at them. In this contextual and temporal interchange, the secular and the sacred, the holy and the ordinary intertwine.

This potential of bridging a divide is even more curious in the contemporary world,

marked as it is by a dualistic thinking. As to visual images, Alain Besançon explains in *The Forbidden Image* (1994, 379–80) that modern science has tended to introduce a rupture in the relationship between divine and profane images. He claims that when the divine is no longer seen in nature, the idea of the divine becomes devoid of any anthropomorphic or cosmomorphic attachment. When modern science limited itself to mere positivism, why contemplate nature, it was asked, as one could very well analyse it? And all along the artist still insisted that light cannot be reduced to particles and waves and the sacred found refuge in profane art.

Flowers, profane and detheologized, as objects of nature on the altar have precisely the role that Besançon describes. They bridge a divide. They open up to an imagination and creativity that other parts of the liturgy, or other more explicitly Christian images, do not, precisely because those are so loaded with apparent connotations and doctrinal clarifications. Altar flowers may nurture anyone visiting a church. In precisely that capacity they have a special potential, in line with what the Swedish iconologist Ingvar Bergström (1958, 165) acknowledged already in the 1950s. He underlined that in much visual art, the boundaries between the religious and the profane had been dismantled. Yet, he suggested, any factual knowledge of the symbolic value leads one deeper into the meaning of the image originally regarded as merely profane.

In this interchange and bridge-building lies an opportunity for theological research. Altar flowers relate to a lived religiosity and can speak to new modes of spirituality, while at the same time bearing traditional Christian meanings. A theology of altar flowers needs to be reconstructed from this holistic perspective. This requires a new

kind of thinking. While, as Sinding-Larsen claims (1984, 33), for earlier generations it was quite customary to see everything in the unifying light of ecclesiology and liturgy, this is difficult for modern scholars. I suggest that altar flowers, moving away from too rigid categorizations, may make these opportunities available. After all, an approach that bridges a divide is not unheard of in theology.

It is nothing new that liturgy, beauty, structure, communication and function all belong together in an indivisible unity within the church (see Weman 2012, 164). Many theologians, philosophers and art-historians have discussed the potential of the relationship between religion and arts and aesthetics and the opportunity of images conveying religious meanings. Quite a few could therefore contribute to shedding light on the theology of altar flowers.

Paul Tillich's cultural theology would certainly be one fruitful analytic tool in studying aspects of bridging the divide between the sacred and the secular. Tillich was keen to explore the connections and translation of religious questions through arts. He posits that central existential questions are dealt with in the form of expression and symbols. He appreciates religious pictures' function as pictures of genuine revelatory events. At the same time he exhibits a scepticism about the degree of verifiable information derived from religious pictures (Palmer 1984, 158).

Another German Protestant theologian, and contemporary of Tillich, was Rudolf Otto. He stood against rational religion, where things like spirit, reason, will, the almighty and consciousness are explained. For him, the holy is quite a different category. He talked about the numinous, an irrational feeling of awe, as the basis of religion. The numinous cannot be reached as

such, it cannot be taught or defined. But it can be held in awe. According to Otto the ability to intuit the numinous relates to an aesthetic sensibility. Such an awe can help to encompass individual religious needs (Otto 1929, 1–7).

The bridging role is more than just bridging between the two contexts assumed at the start of this article. Although it becomes clear that the two contexts become incomplete as stand-alones and that a more holistic perspective that dismantles too rigid categorizations needs to be adopted. The perspectives in bridging a divide between the sacred and the secular bring a whole new impetus to the argument in this article. Firstly, the perspectives underline how the ignored and forgotten altar flowers may make space for the numinous, both during the liturgy and outside it, and address the existential needs people have. Precisely at that point the theological role of altar flowers intensifies, and they become important again. Secondly, with altar flowers the text-focused approach seeking certainty, orthodoxy and conformity gives way to more subjective interpretation. Altar flowers can exemplify new ways of doing theology altogether in the contemporary world we live in today.

Conclusions: the applicability of the results to further research

According to Jason Wyman in *Constructing Constructive Theology* (2017, 176–77), constructive theologies are best evaluated on their applicability to contemporary Christian life, in churches and by lay people or even by people who take Christian views seriously from a non-religious or other religious standpoint, supported by rigorous intellectual analysis. This article has contributed to such an endeavour.

The two contexts that were mentioned were the liturgical and the extra-liturgical.

It was further mentioned that rather than clearly defined contexts, they make a matrix-like framework, where different elements play a role in different contexts. It was suggested that a further role for altar flowers could be a bridging role between different perspectives. The contexts are no end categories in themselves. They are openings to a world of opportunities for further discovery of meanings and interpretations. This applies in particular to the theology of altar flowers within the need for construction. Several new objects of research are outlined within this article.

For example, to reconstruct a theology of altar flowers, their role in conjunction with the theology of the altar more generally and as part of the liturgical objects on the altar would merit more research. Altar flowers alongside eucharistic objects and a theology of sacrifice in general would give important perspectives on a theology of altar flowers. The interplay between altar flowers and other flowers in the church merits more research. Such research can be carried out in large part as literature studies. As altar flowers form an element of lived religion, more empirical methods could become applicable, too. It would be interesting to learn of the meanings attached to altar flowers by different groups of people. The symbolism by which flowers rather than other things suit the altar would equally be of interest. In addition, many ethical concerns relating to climate change in general become relevant in connection with altar flowers.

Any such endeavour needs to be carried out through dialogue, exchanging ideas and debating perspectives with a theological community and the wider scientific community. Such an approach has long been reflected in theological research, and it has now been made a focal point in constructive theology (Wyman 2017, 173). In

connection with research in arts and aesthetics such engagement has consequences. It is almost impossible to say anything definitive about the content of aesthetics. Very different perspectives may be offered by researchers, making the debate an end in itself (see Edgren 1998, 287–88; Bergström 1958, 9). It leads to a certain plurality in expected and possible results. In a study on altar flowers this can be part of the point.

As mentioned, altar flowers can pertain to doctrinal truths and nurture the imagination of someone who is fully unaware of those truths at the very same time. What becomes apparent is that the two interpretations do not rule each other out. Altar flowers can bear liturgical meanings and at the same time speak to an individual in ways that do not coincide with the liturgical meanings. Both interpretations exist in parallel. Hence this article, with its suggested methods of producing a theology of altar flowers open to interesting perspectives on contemporary theology, and theological methods in general.

At the start of this article some methodological challenges, or rather opportunities, were mentioned. After this presentation these opportunities can be re-worded. It turns out that feasible methods for producing a theology of altar flowers follow some recent developments in considerations around the theological method in general.

While a taste for religious institutions has diminished, people still exhibit spiritual needs. New rituals and ways for spiritual practice emerge. These will also need theological reflection. There is a need for churches to rethink and reword what they do. The theology of altar flowers can support this endeavour as new perspectives need to be opened on old themes, and doctrines put in a dialogue with lived practices. The existing void in the written theology of

altar flowers does not mean that flowers would not be theologically purposeful. The textual and the lived practice can go hand in hand and exist side by side. Writing a theology of altar flowers may support the writing of other such theologies as well. The findings of this article will hopefully inspire any such future endeavour. ■

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